



The Author

*My Kingdom For
Dream*



Christopher Cardew

MY KINGDOM FOR A DREAM

CHRISTOPHER CARDEW

ARTHUR H. STOCKWELL Ltd.,
Elms Court Ilfracombe,
Devon

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First published in Great Britain, 1974

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	7
The Donkey's Secret or Lucifer	9
The Blind Boy	45
Lost Voyage	93

ISBN 7223 0623-7
Printed in Great Britain by
Arthur H. Stockwell Ltd
Elms Court Ilfracombe
Devon

FOREWORD

It is a rare talent to be able to combine imagination, simplicity, the good and the true, in fast-moving and gripping stories. It is precisely this judicious combination that makes Christopher Cardew's stories both interesting and moving.

Each story makes charming and skilful use of animals, and presents their part in the drama in a beautiful, childlike manner.

THE BLIND BOY and THE LOST VOYAGE convey excitement, shock, delight, suspense and the pure beauty of spiritual peace and joy.

THE DONKEY'S SECRET has a special quality of charm which is heightened considerably by the great curiosity one senses in the unfolding of the story.

Although there is a simple beauty in these stories, there is also a deep and profound spiritual message. In fact, at least two stories might be classified as allegorical: THE BLIND BOY and THE DONKEY'S SECRET. THE LOST VOYAGE has snatches of allegory. All of these allegories centre around the Redeeming Christ. These stories are uplifting to a degree seldom found in current literature, and unconsciously the reader will find himself elevated and refreshed with a contact with Goodness.

This Goodness is all the more present and powerful as it is sensed in the real persons who live in each story, and each one in his own particular way radiates this quality. The blind, wandering Stephen fascinates and makes the reader unaware of the impending tragedy that bursts upon him — just as it happens in life. The tender relationship between Deiter Karl Richter and the donkey, Christoph, warms the soul for the ensuing part the donkey plays in the divine drama of the Passion. Finally, Richard Hamilton and his son, Hamish, demonstrate the strong and human ties between parent and child in a moving and courageous way.

Thus Christopher Cardew reveals himself as an author and person in close association with the Redeeming Christ and men. He weaves the Redemption into the fabric of human life. His insights reveal him as a man deeply sensitive to God and his fellow men. One can hardly put down these stories without having a clearer perception of Christ and of the invitation to join in the Redemption through one's own life — just as Christopher Cardew and each of his characters have done.

April 24, 1973

ALFRED J. JOLSON, S.J.

THE DONKEY'S SECRET OR LUCIFER

*When fishes flew and forests walk'd
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born.*

*With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.*

Nowadays the ass is a beast of amused contempt; yet during the time of Jesus this beast was the bearer of kings: when a king rode to war he rode upon a horse, but when he came in peace he rode on an ass.

It is not hard to feel affection and pity for the donkey, and even more, perhaps, for that special breed with a cross on its back, broad and long, it shows in darker hair from the nape of the neck to the tail's root, and then again from side to side, the cross-pieces hanging down a little behind where a rider's feet would naturally swing.

I wonder if you know why this cross is there at all? and on such a humble animal too? and then only on some donkeys, not on all of them? Yes, their poor

appearance can easily deceive us, though only a brief introduction to almost any donkey will leave most discerning people with a sense of mystery, an enigma which only deepens the more one has to do with this poverty-smitten beast.

Derided and scorned, stubborn and morosely sad, often bewailing its fate with the hideous lament that shakes the night, the donkey is easy to condemn. Yet it has moved in great company, and is more intelligent by far than its nobler cousin, the horse; furthermore, it has about it an aura and sense of pre-knowledge, of past and pained experience, and of living with a burden that bears it to the ground — one that is not yet washed-out in pain and grinding humility.

*The tattered outlaw of the Earth
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me, I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.*

Yes, the donkey is more than just an intelligent, stubborn and patient beast of burden: there is something aloof about him, a crushed humility; though with it a battered almost disdainful pride, and a sadness and sense of fatality which sets him apart from the world, a resignation that is not quite complete, and a bent and burdened heart, though not yet broken.

*Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.*

I knew a donkey once, though it was many years ago when I was a child between eleven and twelve years of age. We lived in Switzerland at the time, and our house nestled on the outskirts of a small village amongst the most beautiful hills and mountains that I have ever seen and walked.

Where was it? Well, that is my secret; but it was well off the beaten track, so the annual tourist invasion did not unduly trouble us; in fact we welcomed the few more intrepid adventurers who made the effort to come our way, making them feel so much at home that they usually returned to us year after year.

And my name? For what it is worth it is Deiter Karl Richter. My father was then doctor to the villagers and farmers who extended deep into the hills around us. Often he was away from home for two or three days at a time, and occasionally I used to go with him, so getting to know the hills and mountains about us almost like the palm of my hand.

My mother? She was a really good soul, kindly and gentle, wise, strong and far-seeing. It is hard for me to say much about her, for you will only think me prejudiced; but I will say that she was more the foundation to my innermost thoughts and life than has been any other person on Earth; for she built within me a web of love, strength and gentleness that is with me to this day. She was well known for miles around, and even across the length and breadth of Switzerland; for while my father unstintingly set his skill to cure his patients' bodily ills, my mother set her great mind to healing their souls. Many sought her, and none was ever turned away.

But I am impatient to tell you about my donkey,

for I loved him, and, even as a child, felt keenly the mystery which shrouded his small frame; a mystery that I sought strenuously to unravel until, in the end, he told me his secret.

We came upon each other in the strangest fashion; a half-grown colt, hairy and unkempt, with ears like the wings of a bat . . . But stop; let me take you back in time, and let me try and tell you the story as it grew on me then, when I was a child.

* * * * *

It had been a beautiful morning, the mountain grass a dancing green, while the blue-gentians, hanging down from inaccessible rocks and crevices, glowed with such life and beauty as to shame my tender depression.

But now the mists, with amazing speed, were descending from the tops of the peaks which surrounded our valley; and it was not long before their lazy tendrils were curling themselves about my legs as I walked, swirling up behind me in minor whirlpools of moisted-gossamer dust.

I was not afraid of losing my way, for I knew these hills nearly as well as any of the men in our village; in fact I welcomed the drifting mists as a shroud to my thoughts, thoughts which worried me, though I did not really understand them. Everything was just too perfect, too ideal and too easy, and my soul rubbed me at its uselessness.

This mood had sat on me uncomfortably since I had got up that Saturday morning, a half-holiday with no school; so that I was unusually cross and petulant, besieging even my poor patient mother

from my petty state, until, eventually, she suggested that I go and walk in the hills to get some fresh air. I went, somewhat ungraciously and feeling very ashamed of myself as I looked up into her deep hazel eyes.

I wandered for some hours, the beauty of the day tugging at my wilful temper; I wandered through the gentle warmth of the sun to the chilling mountain mists, and until I thought it time that I should return. But still my state was unresolved, and I had no wish to go back as I was; besides, I sensed a mood of expectation, or perhaps I merely wished the thought upon myself. Anyway, I thought to delay the moment by sitting on a convenient hummock of grass beside the narrow path I had been following.

With the patience of the country-born I sat and waited, feeling slightly foolish at the silly trend my mind was taking; but I had no wish to change its course, for there was a certain comfort and retreat in my depression, a foolish sense of false strength and security in my stubbornness. So I waited, determined to see this whimsy through.

I cannot say how long I sat there; a quarter of an hour, maybe half. The world around me was close and white, and I could not help reflecting on the wind's lazy power as it drove the wisps of mist in graceful lines and curves, and watching hypnotized as their tendrils curled about my slight, hunched-up body.

There was an infinite artistry in nature which neglected nothing and encompassed all its moods, an artistry that no skill of brush or pen could ever wholly capture, and which, in its very perfection, subtly wrapped-up and carried away my ill mood of

the day.

Soon I relaxed and sprawled back on the grass, heedless of the damp which seeped through my clothes to threaten a later chill. I knew I should be on my way home or my mother might start worrying about me. But I needed just a little longer to consolidate my gains and give me strength.

It was then that there came to me, faintly at first, but growing rapidly stronger, the sound of a man whistling as he walked. My mountain-bred instincts told me that the sounds came from above, from the brow of the hill on which I lay, and over which this man had just come. Mist can play havoc with sounds; for while they carry well, yet they seem to come from all sides, while a dell or a hill can sometimes prove an insurmountable barrier to their waves.

Was this my expectation walking down the hill towards me? I scrambled quickly to my feet and concentrated on listening more intently: I was right, he was approaching, and not alone either, for my quick ears could also just catch the faint shush shush of equine feet as they brushed through the grasses, occasionally clicking against a loose stone.

My heart began to beat more violently, and I began to grow afraid: there was an air of keen expectancy, it was not only my imagination. But my self-developed anticipation, in league with something beyond my comprehension, rooted my feet to the spot so that, although I felt myself trembling, yet I waited where I was.

Closer and closer came the sounds of man and beast, straight towards me as though drawn by a magnet; and with the closing sounds marched that aura of expectancy, growing stronger and stronger,

while my knees shook, and my heart failed and turned to water within me. But I dared not run, even if I could, for they were close upon me now and would hear my footsteps as I fled . . . Oh, how I wished that I had not woken today in that awkward mood; now see where it had led me! Was this retribution coming towards me? If only I could undo what had been said and done today.

My thoughts sprang wildly about, although my feet were like two saplings in the ground, firm and immovable. With a crystal clarity I became even more aware of the mist as it curled in delicate fronds about my legs, and then scattering and drifting away to form again; only now they symbolized a silken trap, and their scattering a faraway mocking laugh at my helplessness.

Then, and before my mind could further distort and twist itself into knots, there strode through the thick mist the shapes and forms of a man and a donkey. But what a man! he seemed as big as a house, and lean and lithe as a chamois.

My fear largely fled from me as soon as I could see this strange man; for although tall and strong, there was also a feeling of warmth and friendliness about him from which no child could shy. Yet, at the same time, I could not help a feeling of reservation and caution; though exactly why this should be so, I could never have said — except, perhaps, that I sensed a darker sub-stratum to the man.

He walked up to me, and then stood, smiling whimsically and looking down on me from his great height; while his donkey's muzzle nudged itself into my side, and I instinctively put out my hand to stroke the soft nose.

And so we stood, for as much as a full minute without speaking; although I cannot remember feeling the slightest bit embarrassed or out of place, only that I noticed his homespun mountain clothes and worn *leder-hosen*, and then his face — it was not a good-looking face, but it was strong and beautiful, almost in a way that my mother was beautiful, though she had the features to support the light in herself.

But this man was quite different: he had a broad forehead and widely-spaced, intensely green eyes that glowed from the depth and strength of the mind behind them. A thinker and dreamer, and one of far sight and vast background; a man with fire in his heart, though tempered and contained at will.

And then below his eyes there jutted a great beak of a nose, a savage contrast to the rich eyes and noble forehead above; yet only to be softened again by a wide and sensitive mouth, supported by a firm and determined jaw.

Of course, I am reflecting on this man as I am now, grown and mature; but as a child of eleven his impact on me was so sharp and strong that I can still, even now, recall his features and person in near-perfect detail; while often, with his image before my eyes, I have reflected on the man behind.

He was a man of amazing contrasts: intense and powerful, with an impatient and tempestuous spirit; yet there was also about him a bigness of person so great that I well remember feeling as if my mind was an open book to him — only he never took advantage of it.

But, above all I think, I remember most strongly a deep impression of pain and sorrow which girdled

him about; contained and shielded, it is true, yet to my child's receptive mind strikingly apparent. Then also, and on mature reflection, the strange feeling that he carried on his back the nether regions of the world — a burden that sickened and weighed him down, although, none the less, of his own imperious choice.

Impressions and thoughts flitted across my mind like lightning, strong and clear, but indecipherable to me as I was then, a child.

"Deiter," he said; and I remember his voice as being the richest and most melodious I have ever heard. "Deiter — Karl — Richter." He said my names slowly, individually and reflectively, as though casting back, and as if he had known me before.

I was not at all surprised that he knew my names — it was all a part of the same magic quality which this man carried with him, a quality that also showed in his fascinating personality as it drew me like a magnet.

"It is fortunate that our paths cross," he went on, though more crisply now. "This little donkey is my gift to you; take him and you will soon find you have an objective in life."

"But, sir!" I blurted out as he turned to go; and then, being fearful of losing him, I spoke on in haste — "I know nothing about you, or who you are, and I should not like to take such a big gift from . . ."

The tall man turned back and smiled warmly, a trace of whimsy touching the corners of his mouth — "Don't concern yourself about who I am, for you will no doubt find this out in due course. Just take this donkey, Deiter, take him and look after him. If you do this you will lift a little of the burden from my

shoulders, as you will also find a path of enlightenment for yourself.

"It is not often that I can help people, and so expiate myself to climb a little further on my long road back. So do this for me, Deiter; you will not find that you lack for reward."

He spoke quietly, even sadly, and always in reflection as if another round of life was being re-lived. Also, there was an odd note in his voice as though it came from far, far away; a note which troubled me deeply, although I could not conceive why.

And then, almost instantly, his mood changed: light flashed like daggers from his eyes, so that I fell back a trifle in alarm; while at the same time a strange and vivid impression of a dark angel leapt before my eyes, of tremendous power and ageless knowledge; and also of bars of silvered-light that blocked his flight and held him down on Earth — so strong that not all his strength could bend or break them to his will.

It was then that I began to dimly realize the true greatness of this man as he stood before me, this personage from another World, another dimension altogether. He had raised his arms above his head in an act of concentrated prayer and pleading, while the sweat of pure agony stood out in great drops upon his forehead.

For a moment he remained thus, the atmosphere around him so charged that the hair on my head bristled and stood on end, though not through fear for myself, for I knew he would not harm me in any way. None the less, I had to do or say something, since my own mind was rocking under the strain;

anyway, I felt a deep sympathy for this man, a sympathy which went quite beyond my childish state.

Stepping towards him I grasped his coat and tugged to bring attention to myself — "Sir, sir! please listen to me. I will gladly take your donkey and look after him, especially as it will help you."

At first he gave no sign, though I knew he had heard well enough by his relaxing limbs, and the gradual lessening of the charged atmosphere as my hair stopped bristling and lay down again.

Still holding his coat I waited while he regained his composure and lowered his arms. I must have been thoroughly frightened, for I was scarcely conscious of anything until I felt his right arm drop lightly over my shoulders; only then did I become aware that I was crouched on the ground, one hand still clutched on his coat, the other before my eyes.

"I am sorry, Deiter, truly sorry; I didn't mean to hurt you in any way. When you are much older, I think you will understand. I am glad you will take my donkey, you'll find he's a very intelligent animal."

With that I felt his arm draw away from me, then my left hand was gently loosened from his coat, and the donkey's rein slipped into my grasp.

I looked up and got slowly to my feet, shaken still, but anxious not to lose this strangely compelling man. "Thank you, sir, for this wonderful gift; I'll look after him well — but may I not see you again?"

"No, Deiter, you must never seek me out to meet again," and his voice was sternly forbidding. "I think this is the last time our paths will cross; you rejected me once, and you must reject me again." He paused. "Good-bye Deiter," and then strode swiftly off into

the swirling mist.

"Sir, sir!" I called loudly, for his disappearance was extremely rapid. "What is the donkey's name?" though I was near to tears as I asked the question.

Then back through the mist, for I could not see him, came the answer: "Christoph, his name is Christoph; Christ-bearer!"

Those words, that wonderful voice, will remain with me for ever; never have I heard another so filled with depth and pathos, so resonant with forbidden love and sadness, and yet withal so lovely.

I ran after him, dropping the donkey's rein in my haste, and not caring what he had said to me earlier. I ran and called, and called again and again; but there was no reply and no sign of him, nothing, only the cold, damp mist and my voice oddly muffled in its blanket.

Then I remembered my donkey, and so, anxious not to lose all of this strange man, ran back as quickly as I could, fearful that he might no longer be where I had left him.

But he was there all right, head up and waiting for me, while on his face there appeared to be a very curious expression. Was it a smile? And was that a 'knowing-look' I caught before he ducked his head and cropped the grass?

I slowed my run, walking the last few paces up to my donkey. "Christoph — Christoph. Yes, the name does suit you," I said gently, patting his rough neck and tickling behind his ears.

"But what is this on your back? A great cross!" I exclaimed, noticing the darkly-broad lines of hair as they ran the length of his back, and then across from side to side.

Christoph nudged me in the ribs, apparently pleased with himself; perhaps because I had noticed the unusual markings on his back.

But then, and in some alarm, I became aware that the sun had westered beyond where I would have thought possible in the apparent time which had passed. For the moment I forgot the cross; it was getting late and I knew I would have to hurry back home.

Grasping Christoph's halter I pulled to get him moving; but to my surprise found him strangely reluctant: he came, for in the main he was an obedient donkey, but he came slowly, and every now and then butted his rough head into my body. It was hard work, and eventually I stopped and faced him, hands on my hips.

"Well! what is it now, Christoph? Do you want to come with me or not? You know you're being very difficult." I tried to appear hard and stern; but it was not easy, for already I was conscious of a quite strong affection for this recalcitrant animal. Anyway, there was something he wanted me to do; he was not just being difficult.

When I spoke to him his head drooped despondently, though he pretended interest in some succulent grass at his feet. However, when I stopped speaking, and he knew that I waited, then his head came up and firmly pushed me round to his side.

His wish was quite obvious; in fact it never ceased to amaze me how Christoph could always make known his thoughts, at least to me, and in a manner that never left any room for doubt as to their meaning.

"Oh, so you want me to ride on your back," I said,

a hint of laughter in my voice.

Christoph turned and looked straight into my eyes: there was no doubt about it, nobody could mistake the meaning in those brown, eloquent orbs.

"All right," I said, capitulating to his wish; "but you must be careful, I've never ridden before."

So I climbed on while he stood patiently at my clumsy efforts. It cannot be said that he was very comfortable, rather bony in fact, and I made a mental note to get some sort of covering, an old blanket even, to protect my posterior in the future.

Then, seated at last, we moved slowly off, and I must say that Christoph was absolutely wonderful: at first he walked, almost gingerly, while I gained confidence and became firmer in my seat. But after a while he quickened his pace, until soon he had broken into a smart trot. I found I could hang on, though I rapidly acquired a sore behind from the bouncing, his knobbly backbone, and this new exercise which seemed to call on muscles I had never used before.

But it was all great fun, and I quickly learned how to guide my donkey by word of mouth, and also by leaning and pressing my legs against his side in the direction I wanted to go.

* * * * *

And so there sprang up between us a deep and lasting friendship, one that grew until we became virtually inseparable. Both my parents were very surprised when I rode home on a donkey, but after I had explained how he had come to be mine, they gracefully accepted the situation. Naturally they were

very curious about the tall stranger who had given Christoph to me, though in time even this curiosity waned, and Christoph became a very real part of our family.

Nevertheless, I could hardly help noticing that my mother changed, becoming very reticent and reflective over the whole matter. On several occasions I tried to draw her on as to who the tall stranger might have been; but I got nowhere, in fact she always shied abruptly away from the question. I felt certain she knew, or at least suspected, far more than she ever said; indeed, more than once, I came upon her and Christoph just standing and looking at each other, my mother wrapped in deep thought, while Christoph's reaction could only be described as highly communicative.

But I was young, and the riddle still beyond my reach. Besides, another and far greater matter came to needle my inquisitive mind: the great cross on Christoph's back. Often I would look and run my hands along these broad bands of darker hair, while within me there grew steadily a greater interest in why this cross was there, and why only on a few donkeys and not on all of them? This interest swelled and filled my mind, until soon it became an overwhelming and dominant need 'to know'.

I asked my mother, I asked everyone in the village, I asked the few nuns we had at school, the priest at our church, and strangers who came to visit and enjoy this part of Switzerland; few were spared from the same interminable question. But always the answer, if there was one at all, would basically be the same — 'God gave the donkey his cross, because it was a donkey that carried him into Jerusalem on Palm

Sunday.'

Of course, there were many variations to this theme, though none disturbed the fundamental idea. I could not disagree with it, although I felt it was only a part of the story, and the lesser part at that. My reasoning was hard to define, in fact it was more a strong feeling which, although I knew myself to be right, I could in no way express in words, or even really in thought.

A full year passed, and tomorrow was to be Palm Sunday. Since I had had Christoph for a friend and companion, my life had been filled in a quite extraordinary way. Naturally, I had several friends from school, and from the many people my parents knew; but it was not quite the same, for although I got on very well with most of them, yet with them I could only express my natural self; indeed, to have done otherwise would only have invited mockery and probable exclusion from their friendships — in any case, being still very young, my surging nature needed its expression.

But Christoph was my mental and spiritual mirror, yet much more than a mirror, for he seemed to me to be of quite vast experience and past knowledge. How this should be in a mere donkey, a beast of the fields, I never troubled myself to fathom — for of what matter was it? I lived for what I had, and I had Christoph who surely understood my innermost thoughts and fears, and my wonder at all things bright and beautiful. He seemed to know, better than I, what I needed in life, and what I wanted to add to life. He knew and approved, I could always feel it.

However, today I was a little depressed; for a full year had passed since I had met the tall and fascin-

ating stranger and been given Christoph. The afternoon was mine to do as I pleased, and, as though motivated by some compelling force, Christoph and I threaded our way up into the hills, along the same paths that I had taken one year ago, and along which I had not been since that very special time.

Retracing my steps, we walked together, boy and donkey; and an odd couple we must have looked to any stranger, though in the village people scarcely turned their heads any more except to casually greet us as we passed. But today there was nobody to see us, for the mist had descended, just as it had this day a year ago, and we walked on silently with its disturbed fronds of silken vapour trailing and spinning at our passing.

At length we arrived at the very same spot where I had stopped before, and where I had met the strange man. Only now there was nothing, nothing but the cold mist, Christoph and I, and a deep silence as the country lay asleep under its sodden blanket.

I sat down on the same tuft of grass on which I had sat before. The question as to the origin of Christoph's cross burned and filled my mind, as also did a sense of expectation, though in a different pattern than before: yet nothing but peace surrounded us.

"Christoph," I called quietly to where he cropped the grass a few feet away. He looked up, and then came and stood in front of me.

"Christoph, for a whole year I have asked about the big cross upon your back, I have asked everyone I know, every stranger who has passed this way; but nobody really knows why it is there. I must know — can't you tell me, my poor donkey? Is there no way at all that you can speak?"

Christoph looked so sad, and I felt so wretched, that I burst into silent tears, ashamed, but quite unable to stem their flow. I felt his soft nose caress my cheek in sympathy; and then he stepped back a pace, threw up his head and gave vent to that awful despairing bray, a sickening cry wrenched from a nearly broken and over-burdened heart.

"Oh, Christoph!" was all I could say through my tears, for his own exposed depths tore me to the core.

Again he looked at me, only this time his eyes were full of love and glowing with expression and purpose, though also lit with a sad farewell which pierced me through like an arrow.

"No, Christoph!" I cried; "not that too . . . !"

But before I could speak any further, he stepped towards me, lowered his head, and butted me smartly in the ribs so that I fell over backwards, cracking my head sharply on a stone that lay, half-buried, behind me.

* * * * *

The blow must have knocked me out for some time, though I appeared to come to almost immediately, and with my head as clear as a bell.

Christoph still stood before me; but now he was different, and so was the country all around me: the mist had cleared as if by magic, and although the scene before my eyes was quite familiar, yet now everything shone and glowed with a life and brilliance that normally we can never see on earth. It was like a coarse veil being stripped away, revealing the world as it really was. Christoph, too, still my dear friend and donkey, stood exactly as he had, poor and

unassuming, though now he was cloaked in a wonderful aura of clarity and dignity.

I found also that we could speak to each other in thought, effortlessly and quite naturally; not now in clumsy words, but rather in a series of instantaneous patterns needing no translation, so crystal-clear were they, and so full in meaning.

So it was that I knew Christoph wanted me to get on his back. I did so, and away we trotted, his hooves scarcely touching the ground, while we sped more swiftly than the wind.

Thus began a journey I will always remember. But how can I ever begin to describe it? We travelled through time, over land and sea, and back through history which I had learnt at school, and now re-learnt as I saw it in reality, distorted and changed over the years by bigoted men and prejudiced historians.

Back and back we went, and I found my mind full and alive to all that I saw, receptive to every fleeting scene, no matter their speed in transition. Christoph's head was stretched out like an arrow, while his hooves tirelessly spurned away the gathered years.

He was beautiful, and I loved him more now than perhaps ever before. Yet, and in spite of the exhilaration that fired my blood, I feared what lay ahead; for though we covered years in a flash, and centuries in little more than a few brief moments, I carried with me the indelible memory of Christoph's last sad farewell, and wondered at its meaning.

Now we were speeding towards Jerusalem, and I knew that we had reached the end of our journey. Soon Christoph's hooves were again rapping out their tune on the hard ground, while all about me slowed

to the pattern of the present.

Then we arrived at a field outside Jerusalem, between Bethphage and Bethany. I slipped off Christoph's back, and watched as he trotted away to a near-corner of the field, and to a full-grown female ass, his mother, who stood there waiting. As I let him go from me I became aware that he was different again: now, once more, he had become as he was when the tall stranger had given him to me a year ago; a foal, a colt as yet unriden by any man — while also, and this more terrible to me, I knew that he was back in the reality of the present, and now between us there spanned a wide gulf of nearly two thousand years.

There was nothing I could do but watch and wait, helpless and unseen, though thrilled by the sounds of a great crowd of people as they approached from the distance. I knew where I was, as I knew when I was — though not here as Christoph had been. The mystery teased at me, but it remained too intangible to grasp.

Then the great scene began to unravel before my eyes: the two disciples from Jesus, the brief explanation to the donkey's owner who appeared over the brow of the paddock at the same moment, the untethering of the mother, and Christoph, the colt, following behind as she was led away.

Christoph passed close to me, though he took no notice of my presence; and I, conscious of the gulf fixed between us, could make no move to touch him. But I clearly saw that there was no cross on his back, nor any sign of one to come.

I followed, drawn by the magnetism of Him who approached. Like Christoph before, my feet scarcely touched the ground, though I did not skim its

surface, but wandered easily behind, a wraith among realities, yet no less real myself.

* * * * *

And now I come to the hardest part of my story to relate; simple enough in material detail, perhaps, but so full of vitality and pathos, of unseen forces pulling one way and another, of such depth and personal involvement, that I find it hard to express myself.

The physical scene alone, as it unrolled before my eyes, was in itself of enormous proportions — the world has seen no greater; yet even this a drop when set alongside the hidden scene which lay behind, and all quite beyond the limitations of any language to link and carry in its fullness.

If there is one truth that I have grasped, it is this: heresy arises from any attempt to be completely intelligible. A paradox maybe; but though we are in duty bound to seek and see as far as we are able, to understand as much as we can grasp; yet we are finite creatures, while God is Infinite. Furthermore, we stand far lower on the ladder of life than we suppose in our conceit, so that, no matter our aspirations, we cannot reach higher than certain limits while in our natural state, and which our natural state imposes.

It is foolishness to strive to worry over every detail, but the essence of wisdom to raise our souls so that we might, in time, release them from the ties of earth and body. Let the spirit absorb the truths of God and life, but meanwhile govern the mind to contain its rebellious nature: for it is the mind which is finite, not the spirit.

So it is through simplicity that knowledge comes

to some; and through the complex theory, proudly bitten deep, that heresy and ignorance come to others.

Let me, then, go on more as a child; for I was a child when all this happened to me, and as a child I saw things more simply than I do now, now that I have had many years in which to reflect and penetrate these mysteries more deeply.

I well remember a strange timelessness to my state; such as when we dream, and one condition follows upon another in a series of vivid patterns, allowing no space for time — and yet, in a sense, more fully complete than when in our state of time on Earth; though I knew that I was not dreaming.

* * * * *

And so I followed Christoph until I came to that great crowd of people, some of whom were quiet, although most had lost their senses, either wholly or in part; shouting, leaping about, and crying almost hysterically — “Hosanna! Hosanna to the King!”

I looked towards Jesus, the centre and object of all this wild adulation; to find that only He was calm, alone, and saddened even by their display. But even so, His magnetism and warmth were intensely compelling, striking chords within me which had scarcely been touched before, and which I could not properly understand. Truly, He held my spirit in a mighty grip, the stronger for its freedom — this Man was not just Master of the World, He was Master of His complete-self and all the states and forces about Him.

With agony in my heart, my eyes blurred as I watched this joyous crowd wending its slow way up

the hill towards the gates of Jerusalem. Jesus' face was strong and pure, but sad, and I saw that He did not like the situation He was in. It was not in these people to understand, expecting, as they did, that He would carry all before Him, raising the Jewish people to their 'rightful' place as God's chosen race, and leaders of the World.

Not even His disciples really grasped the import of all that lay ahead, nor the fickle crowd who followed in a state of semi-frenzy, and probably not the recently-cured blind man who ran happily on in front — few of them had any foresight, swept up as they were in the flood-tide of mob-emotion.

Only I, standing nearly two thousand years ahead of this time, had any true conception of the tragedy which was beginning to unfold before my eyes: a tragedy that would lead to glory, and draw men with it too; but a smirch on mankind and a murderous tragedy none the less.

I stood where I was while people milled around and through me, I stood and watched this moving pageantry go by. Perhaps I could not stir of my own will? though all I knew was that I wanted to go with Jesus and Christoph, I wanted to be with Him always. But I could not, for something held me where I was until every one of them had passed me by, and until the great concourse of people was only a haze of dust and noise as they entered Jerusalem.

My life was forgotten, my mind filled only with a great and overwhelming love for this Man, this Jesus. He was my life, and I felt lonely and empty without Him. The priests' derision and venomous hatred, Pilate's cowardice, the terrible scourging and the savage agony of the Cross; all this was with me in a

red haze of pain — perhaps even some small part of His burden was mine to share and carry?

I only wanted to help Him, to tell Him that I loved Him, to be by His side while others mocked and crucified Him. But at the same time I could not help feeling lost and helpless, tortured by the thought that perhaps He would not remember me, and needing Him more badly than I ever knew before.

Then, and whilst in this pained and uncertain frame of mind, I felt His hand upon me, His great spirit gather me up, and such a state of contentment, peace and beauty, that I quite forgot my courage, even my wish to support and help, and sank asleep in His enfolding arms.

* * * * *

More than three days later, though I cannot say how I knew, I found myself with Christoph and walking towards the house of the High Priest, Caiphas. It was very early in the morning, though still quite dark, and busy with more noise than I would have expected at such an hour. My actions, and Christoph's company, seemed perfectly in keeping with the present, so that it scarcely occurred to me to wonder how we came to be there.

We entered the great courtyard together, and I felt, rather than knew through my mind, that Jesus was within the palace being interrogated by the council of the elders. I knew also that it was nearly three o'clock in the morning, and that the bugle call to change the Roman guard could sound at any moment.

I remembered, too, the sequence of events to come, so desperately looked around for Peter,

foolishly thinking that perhaps I could persuade him not to deny Jesus for the third time. It was folly, of course, though well meant; for I could neither be seen nor heard, and nor could I possibly intervene in any matter of the present: besides, who would listen to a child?

Then I saw Christoph, head up and looking towards a group of people standing by a glowing brazier near the entrance to the courtyard. Almost immediately I recognized Peter, tall and broad-shouldered, bearded and with a rugged face, he stood out amongst the rest like a giant among pygmies. There was tremendous potential power in him, I could feel it; though now he was an utterly broken man, and I could see this too.

My noble intentions blew away like fluff in the winds of reality, and I made no move towards the people gathered about the fire; again my feet seemed clamped firmly to the ground, and I realized that I could not do anything. So we watched, Christoph and I, helpless to change the pattern of events which I knew must pass.

A violent altercation was ensuing within the group of some dozen people in all, and it was Peter who was the object and centre. A shrewish looking woman, dressed in the garb of a maid-servant, pointed at Peter accusingly — while he was plainly denying the accusation, the sweat of fear standing out on his forehead.

But his denial had little effect, for he could not escape this time, and it was not long before most of the others had also taken up the cry. An ugly situation was building up, and one from which no calmly-worded denial would suffice. Peter's eyes

glazed in horror as the trap closed in on him — he might have had the courage, but he was plainly tired and mentally exhausted, puzzled and lost, and shattered too by a turn of events which he had never really thought could happen.

Suddenly something snapped in his over-burdened mind, and he raised his arms in fear-ridden anger, cursing and swearing at his tormentors, who fell back before the sheer force of his vehemence.

It was then that the second bugle of the night sounded, clear and splitting the dark with its faint echos among the streets of Jerusalem.

Alas, the story was told again. Peter's arms dropped like a stone to cover his face, while the group encircling him remained silent. Throwing his cloak over his head, he groaned aloud in his anguish of spirit; then, crying loudly against his persecutors, burst his powerful body through the ring they had made about him, and ran out into the night weeping bitterly.

Some of them made as if to follow him, but seeing the indecision of their fellows they fell back again and muttered among themselves.

I turned to Christoph who, although visible, was quite aware of my presence. Thoughtfully I laid my hands on his rough coat, its feel strangely solid and normal, though my presence cut through all else with no more than a faint sensation of tingling.

Aware of the past and present, while also sensitive to the future, I dreaded what was to follow — for Christoph had not yet earned his Cross, and this coming scene had never been revealed and passed on: perhaps the fate of a mere donkey, however meritorious, was of too insignificant a nature to warrant

recording? Or perhaps none of Jesus' disciples or followers had properly witnessed the scene, wrapped as it was in the midst of greater events, so that this small section of Divine history had become lost?

I felt that my latter reasoning was nearer the truth: after all, the Gospellers had faithfully recorded the earlier events when Christoph had borne Jesus into Jerusalem.

My heart was filled with foreboding, and I bent to put my arms around Christoph's neck, hugging him tightly in my fear of loss. He nudged me back in a way that I knew so well, and then rubbed his head against my side to show his affection — but his actions, although genuine in intent, were half-hearted, and I could sense that his mind was really elsewhere, consolidating himself for a coming event.

I straightened up and looked about me: Caiphas' courtyard was spacious, and seemed, at least on this night, to be a central meeting place for all and sundry. At first I wondered why they did not notice Christoph and turn him out, even though he stood partially hidden in the shadow of a pillar; but then, and on further observation, I saw that nobody appeared concerned at who or what was in the courtyard, and that there were also other animals wandering idly about.

Time passed, two hours, possibly more; although I was not conscious of its burden or delay, while yet being quite aware of its passing and all that went on in the courtyard.

The sky was lightening to the east as the pre-dawn heralded its first blush. It was then that Christoph shivered, and I knew something was about to happen. Tensed and expectant, I watched the awakening

world grow lighter and lighter on this, its darkest day; rosier and brighter until, almost suddenly, the rising sun's rays were winging their shafts of light over the city of Jerusalem.

At that moment there came a shocking, jarring crash as the palace guards grounded their spears, and the huge doors swung open, vomiting forth the council of the elders, some more guards, and Jesus.

Their fateful decision reached, Jesus had been bound and surrounded, the ends of the binding cords in His captors' hands so that they pulled first one way and then another, striking, mocking, and driving Him forwards.

Staggering often under the weight of their petty and vicious attacks, and thrown off-balance by His arms being so tightly lashed behind His back, I saw that His face was both cut and bruised, and He looked desperately weary.

But in spite of His sufferings and heaped indignities, here was a Man and King of kings, a Divine presence so strong that His judges, captors and tormentors paled into insignificance in His royal presence, even though He was their apparently helpless prisoner.

I was amazed that all those around Him could not see who He was, and so what a terrible deed they were perpetrating. But most of the old men of the council had hard faces, while the soldiers and bystanders were merely taking their lead.

Jesus was being prodded, pulled and driven towards the entrance to the courtyard, and in a few moments would pass close to me. Again I wanted to spring to His side; but could not, for again my limbs were locked in a tight embrace, inhibiting my leaping the

gulf in time.

None the less, I was very much aware of Christoph, and of his nervous, eager fretting now that Jesus was nearly opposite me. He looked quickly up into my face, his big brown eyes sad and filled with love.

Then, and with no further warning, Christoph trotted straight towards Jesus. My heart filled with pride, and my eyes with tears, as I watched him go: I was not to be wholly unrepresented in this awful drama, for I knew, and I think Christoph knew too, that this time he carried something of me with him, and this in spite of his reliving this scene from the past. I hoped that it would give him strength; and I think it did, for I was with him all the way.

What followed was both lovely and bitterly cruel, and came near to tearing my heart in two. Before anyone could realize what was happening, Christoph had reached Jesus, put his warm muzzle against Jesus' side, and supported Him as far as he was able against the soldiers' cruel tugging on the double-ended rope, and also from as many of the vicious blows that he could take on his own body.

The sheer audacity and courage of Christoph's action, especially coming from a mere animal, was such that the whole procession stopped, and for a space, in which one might breathe thrice slowly, a deathly silence fell upon all in the courtyard.

Jesus looked down on Christoph and smiled, a gentle and lovely smile, carrying with it a deep and immeasurable love in its brief moment. Then He bent and whispered into Christoph's ear words that only I, in my time-split state, could hear.

"Little donkey, for this love and loyalty of yours you will always bear my Cross upon your back, and

this sign will be repeated in all your mother's offspring until I come again. You must carry my love, a degrading burden in the eyes of the world, and this will set you amongst the highest and noblest animals in my kingdom, and the closest to Me."

Then they tore Christoph away, and I heard a woman's voice from behind me cry — "Surely, that is the very donkey that carried this Jesus into Jerusalem? Kill it! Club it to death so there might be nothing left to mark this heretic's life!"

Like a rush of fire through dried grass, the hysterical cry was carried from person to person, and in a moment six or seven men from the guards and bystanders had leapt upon Christoph with upraised clubs and staves.

Once or twice I saw Christoph's hooves lash out as he strove frantically to stay by Jesus; but his muscles were too young to enable him to regain his place, and his colt's body too light to withstand the cruel bludgeoning. In a few seconds he was down, and all I could see was the rising and falling of heavy weapons, and listen to the dull, sickening thuds as they landed on his breaking body.

My feelings were so strong during this whole beautiful and awful scene, so mixed, that I am still unravelling them now more than thirty years later. Fundamentally, I suppose, I was deeply shocked and disgusted — though such words are too narrow and feeble, and do little more than scratch the surface. But I was also proud, proud of my donkey's love and loyalty; admixed with which were a myriad indefinite thoughts and impressions that seared across my mind as vivid flashes of lightning, burning themselves indelibly upon my memory; yet, at the

same time, too far-reaching for me to be able to dwell on them as a child, and not indeed for many years did they refresh me with their poignancy and depths.

The killing done, and almost as quickly forgotten, the crowd passed on, goading Jesus before them through the open courtyard gates. My heart bled for Him, but there was nothing I could do, only wing Him my love in thought.

Very soon there was not a single person left, only my ghostly self and the crushed and mangled body of my donkey . . . my Christoph and my friend, true unto death. Not until the last person had left the great courtyard were my limbs freed to move again.

Then I rushed to Christoph, fell on my knees at his side, and gently lifted his head on to my lap. I could scarcely bear to look at the frightful wounds that covered nearly all his body — indeed, there could hardly have been a single unbroken bone left from his battered head to his splintered legs, while blood was splattered everywhere, so terrible was the force and damage done.

I feared he was dead already; though my fear was a selfish thought, for otherwise his sufferings would have been too cruel to bear: such a poor return for all his loyalty and brave heart — and yet, oh how much I wanted to look into those eyes once more, to know that he knew me still, and that perhaps a small part of him would always be mine to hold and love.

I stroked his shattered, bleeding muzzle, rocking slightly from side to side in my grief. But I found I could no longer look at his dead and dreadfully smashed face, so tore my eyes away, only to alight on the bands of darker hair, the great cross that spanned his back, and which Christoph's courage and loyal

soul had won for him. In my distress I had forgotten about Jesus' promise, His promise that was now so faithfully fulfilled in this sign.

Then I felt him move, only his head, and then very slightly. I looked down again, hardly daring to believe my senses, to meet his soft brown eye, open, intelligent and still with life.

Words have always come hardly to me, and my deeper thoughts and feelings wellnigh impossible to phrase. And so it was at this moment: his eye, though dimmed, was full, and I knew his heart and mind as well perhaps as he knew mine.

I did not move my body for fear of hurting him, only stroked his nose while distractedly murmuring endearments. The words meant little, showing only a weak reflection of my affection for this noble beast who was so important to me: for had not his actions gained him the Kingdom of Heaven, and a very special place with Jesus? And was he not thus rich?

Fortunately Christoph's last conscious moments were mercifully brief, and before a minute or two had passed he shuddered, his eyes glazed over, and he died with a great sigh.

I sat on, still as a statue, with Christoph's lifeless head resting in my lap. My mind was numbed and dazed from all that I had seen and felt, and I had neither the energy nor the will to move from where I was, nor to shake off the lassitude which was creeping through my limbs.

How long I remained in this shocked state I have no real idea; I think it could only have been for a short while, since it seemed no time at all to my being aroused from my twilight zone by a nudge in my back.

I turned sharply, and I fear that my mouth must have dropped open in foolish amazement — "Christoph!" I managed to whisper at last.

I could hardly believe my eyes, and for a spell blinked stupidly at him, my brain reeling and tired. But it was true, there he stood, unblemished and whole, and in much the same spirit-form as myself; just as he was when we were in the mountains of Switzerland such a long, long time ago. Again I saw that his rough coat shone and was almost glossy, while the Cross on his back stood out from the grey in a rich dark brown.

I let the dead and mangled Christoph slip from my lap, and got to my feet to face my newly-resurrected and live Christoph. Words were quite beyond me as I shyly put out a hand to feel whether he was really there — he was, and I swear that there was a mysterious smile which flitted lightly across his face.

Then Christoph extended his neck and head towards me, fastened his teeth into my coat-front, and firmly pulled my stupid and unresisting body towards him and to his side.

I knew he wanted me to climb on his back; so, still dazed, but with a wonderful peace and happiness stealing through me, I did as he wished.

For a moment Christoph stood and sniffed the air, nostrils flaring; and I knew he smelt the ethers of the past, the bitter-sweet, the living past that neither he nor I could ever forget.

Then we were off, and once more I thrilled to the strange and wonderful novelty of flying through time, its every moment the embodiment of grace and power, its almost limitless span a new dimension to my earthly sight. Christoph's first leap took us over

the wall, and a year or so towards the present; while his second, third and fourth sped us well upon our way, skimming over and through a wild medley of scenes from ages past. Faster and faster, faster by far than when we came, the pictures merging into a senseless blur of light and shade.

By now I was utterly exhausted, and verging near the point of collapse; no more had I the will or eye to see the things about me, and impressions flitting before my vision, drew back, growing vague and dim. Even the glorious rush, the momentary freedom from earthly ties, held no more for me that a soothing balm to my tired child's spirit.

My body slipped forward, and my arms fell naturally around Christoph's neck. I slept, lulled by the whisper of the fleeing years, and by the graceful swing and lift of Christoph's body as he sped on, on through the more ethereal dimensions of time and space; back to the life I knew, back to the life which could never be the same again.

* * * * *

Hours later I awoke, lying as I had fallen on the lush grass of my Swiss hillside. The day was far gone, and the mists still moved lazily about the mountain's lower slopes, and then, like rivers, poured their gossamer-shroud of moistured-air through the deep valleys.

I felt slightly dazed, but nothing worse; for my memory was mercifully blurred so that I could not recall in any detail all that had happened to me — though I knew well enough that it was something great and wonderful.

But memory of all that I had seen came back to me quite quickly, though without its mysteries and weightier content; for all together and at once, they would have washed away my reason and borne me to the ground.

Gradually, over a period of weeks, months, years and decades, and as I diligently sought and reflected, my experiences gave up their riches as I grew fit and able to receive and understand. Even now, more than thirty years later, I am still drawing from the inexhaustible well of all that I had seen when a child of only twelve years of age, and from this brief and borrowed moment in time.

And who was the tall and striking stranger who first gave me Christoph? How does he weave into the story? Ah, who and how indeed, for on this you must speculate alone. Another man of sorrows, one who walks with a burden of the World's sin upon his back. Perhaps the other side to the eternal coin of life, a side which is one part to the whole in our long climb to God.

THE BLIND BOY

It was a freezing Christmas morning, bright, crisp and clear, with the open ground deeply carpeted in a blanket of soft white snow; even in the forest, through which two bad men walked, there were patches of snow here and there, while everywhere the ground was frozen, hard and brittle.

The two men, both approaching middle-age, walked in silence up the long, gradual slope to the hamlet of Westbourne. They strode out rather too quickly for comfort, almost as though they were being pursued by the ethers of all the uncorrupted beauty around them; they even drew further apart, one striding well ahead of the other: ashamed perhaps of their tainted and discoloured auras that timorously flared in bloodied reds and sickly greens.

Westbourne was small, possessing only one small sweet-shop-cum-post-office, complete with the inevitable bell that tinkled tinnily as the door was pushed open, a few dozen houses, and a little Norman-style church which lay like a cross at the southernmost end of the village, about a hundred yards from the nearest house, and a similar distance from the forest edge.

The two bad men's objective was not the church, though they were now sufficiently close to it, and the road, to hear the rich sounds of joyful singing; they strode on firmly, for the music had a fresh and

enticing quality to it which was hard to resist, and only made the stronger by its life-filled contrast to the leafless and sleeping, spectral forest about them. All was still, save for the slightly slowing crunch of their feet, and for the sweet Noel that filled the air.

Five minutes later, and puffing slightly, the two men reached the road, walked on a few paces, and then, as with one mind, stopped by the open church gate.

The music had ceased now, and all that could be heard were the faint sounds of movement from within; but even this held an anticipatory quality to it, and was sufficient to tip the balance in the mind of the larger of the two men.

His hard features softened slightly as he leaned his body to catch the whisper of sounds in the church. Then, his mind made up, he turned to his companion, beckoned, and walked quickly up the path to the open church door. Hesitating momentarily, the other man followed him and together the two entered this house of God.

The small church was packed with people, and the walls and altar resplendently gay with flowers. At first glance it did not seem possible to find additional places for the two strangers, now both embarrassed as several pairs of eyes were turned on to them where they were standing, nervously shuffling their feet and looking around with blank unseeing eyes.

They had disturbed the service just as the priest was about to give his sermon, and for a moment were tempted to turn and flee. But before their fear could be realized in action, one of the sidesmen got up, smiled, and led them to some vacant seats in the choir stalls.

The two men followed the sidesman up the aisle — though strangely, with every step they took, some of their fear left them. There was in this church a wonderful atmosphere of peace and quiescent power, a presence which gathered up the whole congregation into one family of worship and praise, even though many came from far away — and they too fell under its spell.

Seated at last in the empty stalls, the larger of the two men looked up at the priest in his pulpit, so close that he could have reached him in a couple of strides. A warm and friendly smile met his gaze, and then the priest again turned to address his congregation.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost . . ."

He was an old man, not a day under sixty-five years of age, slight of figure, his hair a silvered pepper and salt; yet withal a man of strange force and mental vitality.

But his eyes were the most striking: a brilliant blue, they seemed not to see, and yet also to see right through a person; they could be most disconcerting, though both men felt accepted and comfortable in his presence, so sat back to listen.

" . . . As many of you know, every year on Christmas day I tell the same story; and this year will be no exception, for it is the purest and most lovely introduction to Jesus that I have ever come across in my life, a miracle in sight and depth. I pray that those amongst you who have heard it before will live through it with me again, thereby growing the richer by its telling and its depth . . ."

The priest's voice was quiet, crystal clear, melodious and very compelling in its almost hypnotic

influence. The congregation sat still in a state of transfixed and heightened expectation; a dropped pin could have been heard, though there was nobody to listen, for all were dreaming, carried away by his words, and living in the story that he told with such a simple enchantment and truth. They too saw and lived the story of 'the blind boy'; and this, as far as the poor skill of my pen may tell it, is what they saw and experienced.

* * * * *

"Rabbit, my rabbit and my eyes to Heaven: Ah, I remember that day very well. We lived in a small village in Warwickshire where my father practised as a veterinary surgeon. Everybody told me what a beautiful part of the country we lived in, though I could not see it, for I was blind; but I could smell and sense the beauty around me, and that is something, isn't it?

"People who have always had good sight are apt to close their eyes to nature's refinements and wonders, to allow the stresses and strains of living, the pollutions and dirt that envelop our crowded lives, to obscure their vision. So perhaps I was fortunate, for what I smelt, felt and sensed, I naturally translated into my own series of unsullied patterns in my mind.

"Nevertheless, they were only patterns, not pictures; for having been blind from birth I could not relate my patterns into shapes and colours. This naturally distressed me greatly, since I longed to see the trees whose rough barks I could feel, the colours of the flowers that I held and touched, the bees that buzzed and hummed on those still summer days, the

birds as they sang, and the grace and movement of all things living.

"Patterns may be the core and source of all movement and beauty, the ultimate in appreciation; but still they are a poor and empty thing without any foreknowledge of form, the missing step in the ladder.

"But I must not distract you any further, so let me start again.

"That very special day was Christmas day, crisp and cold; in fact much like today here and now. I was ten years of age, and my father and I were returning from church to a lunch which my mother had been preparing during the morning; the church was about two miles away, and the walk back over fields and through woodland copses.

"The service had been very beautiful, and the whole church filled and gay with flowers; though it had awakened in me that barely dormant feeling of frustration, so that I walked back more quietly than usual, my senses instinctively attuned to the uneven ground.

"My father, too, feeling my mood, was also more silent, not knowing perhaps what to adequately say under the circumstances.

"And so it was when my father suddenly stopped, his hand on my arm — 'Hello! what is that over there?' he exclaimed, forgetting I could not see where he was looking.

"'Come,' he went on, taking a firm hold of my hand, 'let's go and see.'

"So we ran over the rough field to where, about fifty yards away, its edge bordered a small wood. But as we drew near to what my father had seen, he

slowed his trot to a walk, and then stopped altogether, pulling me up by his side.

"What is it, Dad?" I asked impatiently, tugging at his firmly clasped hand. 'Why have you stopped?'

"It's a wounded rabbit, Stephen. There's nothing we can do about it,' he replied slowly.

"But you're a vet, Dad; surely you can try and make it better?' I persisted.

"Well, actually it's a case of myxomatosis; and you know that there's no real cure for this disease. We would do better to knock the poor animal on the head and put it out of its misery.'

"Please, Dad, let's try just this once; you can always put it to sleep later if there are no results — Please,' I pleaded.

"Hmmm,' he grunted, letting go of my hand and bending down over the sick animal; 'I admit the disease is in its fairly early stages, and I do have certain drugs that I have long wanted to try out as a curative for myxomatosis.'

"My father paused as he picked up the rabbit and examined it more closely, while I waited quietly on tenterhooks of anxiety. Whatever the disadvantages of blindness, it does at least teach patience: the blind are so dependent on others that, in their estrangement, they usually cultivate a far larger proportion of their minds and senses; consequently they naturally, and almost of necessity, often acquire an amazing mastery over their rebellious will, powers of concentration and imagination.

"It seemed a long time, though it could hardly have been more than a minute, before my father at last straightened up with the rabbit in his arms — 'All right, Stephen, we'll take her home and I'll do what I

can; but don't pin too much faith on my skill as a vet: there can hardly be more than one chance in ten that she'll pull through.' He paused, and then said the next few words very gently, 'Why, even now she is blind and her eyes beginning to bulge.'

"I found it hard to control my relief, and gulped audibly before I could manage to reply — 'Thank you, Dad; thank you very much indeed. I'm sure you'll make her better somehow.'

"We turned for home, and over the remaining distance I pestered my father with all sorts of questions: her colouring, size, age, details of the disease, how much he thought she was suffering, and so on.

"He was very patient, and after having learnt that she was a young female rabbit, probably not more than six months old, fairly small, and of the normal brown colouring given to wild rabbits, beginning to suffer quite severely in her breathing from constriction of the throat, and that he, as a vet, could certainly ease her difficulties, though probably not cure her, my father turned to me and laughed: 'Enough, Stephen, enough please; so many questions, and here we are, nearly home now.' He squeezed my hand affectionately, 'Don't worry, whatever the end result I can at least promise that I'll give her all the skill I have.'

"He was as good as his word, and for half an hour or so worked on her in his animal dispensary. Here too my mother came out to see us and find out what had delayed our coming into the house for lunch. However, she was well-used to this sort of situation, for my father and I sometimes found and recovered injured animals, though they were more often

brought to us by the local village children, usually captives from poachers' snares, terribly torn and lacerated, pathetic and very trusting in their weakness.

"As a result this shed and our garden were used very much as a wildlife hospital-cum-sanctuary, the animal and bird turnover being fairly considerable, since we only kept those creatures who would never again be able to fend properly for themselves, releasing the others when they were sufficiently recovered.

"However, our responsibilities never really ended with their release, for many of our patients lived to visit us again and again, even bringing their families. They seldom required our help, apparently desiring only ourselves and the freely-given peace and haven of our garden. So it was, with this and that, and the stores of various foods and medicines which we had to keep always for our many guests and those in need, welcome guests, but not ones who could pay us in the coin of the realm, that my father's income, more often than not, was barely sufficient to sustain us all — a large family indeed.

"I imagine that you are very likely thinking it odd that I, a boy who normally held and handled so many of our woodland creatures, should find this one poor rabbit to be so very important and fascinating. Well, I cannot answer this, at least not properly as I was then, a child of ten; and neither may I detract from the story's freshness by not relating it from my point of view at the time. All I really knew was that I had to save this one animal, not merely for its own sake, but also, in some strange way, for mine; beyond this you must deduce for yourself.

"Does this sound selfish? Perhaps, though I cannot really think that it was under the circumstances: after all, my father's life was dedicated to helping animals, and my greatest joy, whenever I was free from school, was to be with him in his work and do what I could in my sightless state No, in some inexplicable way, I just knew that this rabbit's life was different and closely intertwined with mine.

"Yet, even so, 'Stephen's rabbit', or just 'the Rabbit', as he came to be known, did not get any better all that Christmas day, though my father did everything he could. Her pain and discomfort were certainly eased, but the dreaded and slowly killing myxomatosis in her bloodstream could not be allayed, and continued to run its death-dealing course.

"Lunch was a strain, the good fare an indigestible mess; while the long afternoon and tea weighed their heavy hours on my back. Every spare minute I was by her side, though she could not have known it through the dulling haze of drugs and lack of sight, for neither could she see, not even dimly.

"As the hours passed my parents grew more concerned over my wan face and silence on this, the most joyous day of the year. But they were good souls, and so patient, kind and tolerant; though I do not think that either of them fully understood the whole truth of the situation.

"After tea the evening drew its early mantle over the wintry world, and then slowly dragged its hours to bedtime. My young nerves were frayed and raw, while my will and patience were sorely over-taxed and worn to breaking point — I knew only too well that this night must surely prove the issue, one way or the other, and that my father must in common

mercy take her life if the disease had further advanced by morning. So I lay in my eternal darkness, a darkness which scarcely knew day from night, tortured and dumbly suffering, while the slow hours drifted by.

"Eight, nine, ten o'clock — though I had no means of telling the time, yet I knew my parents' movements so well that it was not hard to work out the approximate hour. Then, and just before going to bed herself, my mother crept into my room, stopped by my bed, bent and gently kissed me on the forehead, while I refrained from any movement that might reveal my wakeful state.

"I stirred under her caress, my mind a bubbling turmoil of ill-defined needs and tugging stresses — how easy it would have been to put up my arms and pull her down to me, how satisfying to tell her all that I felt and thus relieve the tension; yet somehow I knew that such temporary relief could only be had at the total cost of whatever I so indistinctly sought.

"I felt slightly guilty, for I had never before deceived them over any matter of importance, save perhaps the innocent privacy of some of my more far-reaching, nebulous and immature thoughts. However, my simple ruse succeeded well enough, and my mother soon straightened up and turned to leave the room, obviously relieved and pleased to find me slumbering so peacefully after such a day.

"Soon after this my parents' bedroom door closed, to be followed shortly by their light switch clicking off. I continued to wait until I judged them properly asleep, or at least as long as my patience could withstand.

"Then, with tensed nerves and extra-sensory

perceptions acutely aware, I pushed back my bedding, swung my legs over the side, groped for and put on my dressing-gown and slippers, opened the door slowly and quietly, listened for a moment, and then made my way as silently as I could to the back door of the house, collected the shed key which always hung on a hook in the scullery, unlocked the kitchen door and crunched my way on the early frost towards the animal dispensary at the far end of the garden.

"One of the very few advantages of blindness is that night offers no more material fears or problems than day: be it sunlit fields or murky over-grown woods and thickets, bright moonlight or pitch dark nights; all states, although individually felt and defined, are the same to the blind in the guiding of the hands and feet.

"The air was crisp and very cold, cutting through my thick dressing-gown as though it scarcely covered my body, while chunks of icy snow slipped down the sides of my slippers when my feet carelessly brushed against the path's snow-piled verge. But my purpose was clear and such things deterred me not at all, used also as I was to our winter's bitter bite; in fact rather did they refresh my decision and lighten my heart, so that, when I reached the dispensary and bent to insert and turn the key, my nerves were calm and I was filled with something more than could possibly stem from within my own frightened and benighted self.

"I unlocked and opened the dispensary door; but then fell back a pace and paused a moment, made a trifle nervous now as the warm, animal-laden air from within wafted gently over me. What should I find? for it was now several hours since I had last seen my

rabbit.

"But then, like a draught of restorative ethers, a fitful breeze of icy air momentarily blew away the warmed odours and gave me back my courage.

"Instinctively I drank deeply of the frozen night, its icy fingers catching at my lungs, then pushed wide the door and stepped inside the lightly-heated room. All about me were stirrings and rustlings, and the sounds of disturbed and sleepy animal voices as they awakened to my entrance.

"Walking quietly across the room, I made my way straight to the cage in which my rabbit had been put that morning; but here there was silence, the silence of drugged pain and closely-pending death — though I could just catch the feeble, gasping whisper of laboured breathing.

"I unsnapped the catch on the front of the cage, lifted it, reached inside and placed my hand on her slight body: she was cold in spite of all the warming down and straw, and my heart was filled with pity for this poor animal and her wretched state.

"Forgotten now were any thoughts of self, and I clearly saw how innocently cruel I had been to persuade my father to keep her alive, alive and suffering in the forlorn hope that she might get better. I was filled with remorse as the hot tears flowed unrestrainedly down my cheeks.

"But then, just as my fingers were gently caressing her ears, and just as I had made up my mind to close the cage and go and wake my father, I felt a strange tingling sensation in the palm of my hand, a tingling that seemed to flow from deep within me; from my head perhaps? though I could not truly place its source; but it was like a painless current of electricity,

a flow of power that poured through me, down my arm, my wrist, my hand and my fingers, and from thence sending its strength and health into the sick rabbit who lay under my now vibrant touch.

"I cannot honestly say that I was either frightened, shocked or alarmed; because in fact none of these emotions really assailed me. A brief surprise perhaps, but beyond this a deep underlying thrill of excitement, and a growing sense of latent power as I realized, in some inexplicable way, that I had been introduced into my heritage, my own, my destiny that for ten years at least had left me alone and in the dark, wandering, maturing and consolidating.

"The blood raced in my veins as I felt, what I certainly knew to be, God's power and healing strength flow through me. I knew my rabbit would be cured completely; for what evil disease could possibly withstand such a tremendous surge of pure strength?

"But dimly I also knew, in this moment of awakening, that this blessing carried with it a burden and fine responsibility; as I knew too, whether or not I would ever again be God's medium for this flow of healing power, that the dedication of my life was being called for, that my future, though nebulous and as yet unseen, must be set in the mould of my purpose, my loyalty and my love for Jesus and all things pure and beautiful.

"You might think these strange and forward thoughts for one so young, a boy of only ten years of age. Yet I tell you that these, and more, were flashed through my mind, though couched in simplicity and innocence, and with a directness that pierced straight through all the complexities of reason, maturity, and our later age and captivity in involved logistics.

"I wish I could express to you more clearly this tremendous experience, and these vital thoughts, as then they were to me. But though their essence is with me now, and although their strength is proved and grown, yet have my age and the passing years, the pain and the toil, part-filled me with a dulling haze; a haze that sticks, no matter the keen penetration of my thoughts, nor the heights or depths to which I rise or sink; a cramping web of the World's making, and a complex mesh from limited nature that subtly wraps itself about us all, stifling and inhibiting the weak from seeing the way, and testing, wooing, and tearing at the strong."

* * * * *

Here the old priest paused, his fine face radiant, though a little tired and touched with sorrow, while he gazed about his rapt congregation, collecting his thoughts before he went on again.

"I wonder if you know that children often have it in them to see beyond the eye of normal mortal man. True, this tenure is normally brief before it becomes smothered by unbelief, worldliness and the constant greed, pettiness and corruptions which surround us all in either greater or lesser degree. But, nevertheless, this gift, brought with them from their closeness in time, their nearness to Heaven, and unsullied for a while, is an invaluable key to the beauties of reality, and an insight into the infinite Mind of God.

"This innocence and clarity of sight is therefore of extremely high worth, and should be nurtured and treated with reverence; not mocked into submission, blindness and oblivion, as is so often the case.

"It is not in the nature of things that most of us, adult and grown within our limited environment, should be able to retain this innocent clarity of sight: the World is too compelling, too demanding, too narrow and insular, too low in vibration and the whole spectrum of life, for us to always see with the eyes of unsullied innocence.

"Of necessity we are immersed in the dictum of our day — and even if we have sufficient strength and nobility of character to rise above our natures, yet there is still a sheen, a self-reflecting mirror, cast between ourselves and reality: a mirror of the World's design, and one on which we are inclined to project our own-created visions; visions drawn from our youth, then gradually, and over the long years, distorted by our contact and involvement with the World, with people and their ways; by centuries of touching and drawing on accumulated, fragmentary and mundane knowledge, superstitions, misbegotten beliefs and unbeliefs; by colleges of higher learning that seek, in their conceit and in terms of finite strength, to reason and explain the infinite Mind of Life through the mediums of this or that to distress and sway our, by then, teetering logic . . . Beware of all these, and more, that altogether seek to pull and veer us left and right, until at last, like rudderless ships, we wander servants to their will, and willy-nilly to our downfall and destruction.

"So thus, as you may see, the longer this period of clear sight lasts, then the deeper, stronger and more rewarding its memory in later years. After all, who can deny that there are fairies at the bottoms of our gardens? Who can deny that flowers have life and gardeners of their own? And who indeed can deny

the many visions brought to us by our children in their innocence? Not I, at any rate, and I hope, even if you cannot give them credence, then you will at least give them a hearing and your sympathy.

"Remember please, though children may see clearly, may accept in trust; yet they cannot explain the whys and wherefores of what they see and know: for they have neither the intellect to reason, nor the experience to support, and nor have they really started on their clouding and distorting journeys through this vale of sorrows.

"But let us away again, and back to the story."

* * * * *

"I cannot say how long my hand lay on my rabbit's body: time was no longer a dimension of any consequence, and for this while I could not feel its pull. Events and forces flowed powerfully, easily and naturally; so that when I felt my rabbit stir, gathering health and strength, the healing power and tingling ceased and I withdrew my hand.

"With my mind split between the World and the accumulated forces about me, though dominated by the gentle ethers of love, I waited patiently until I knew it right to move; then reached in again with both hands and drew her out, now warm and soft and kicking healthily at the empty air.

"On holding her I felt again, more than ever, the curious bond which had drawn us together; and though both its twining mystery and purpose still remained an enigma, yet its strength and presence were clear and undeniable, far outstripping in closeness any normal attachment between boy and animal.

"I felt curious, but even more so deeply thrilled with a sense of anticipation; while my hands ran over her soft fur as she now lay quiet in my arms, their sensitivity revealing almost as much to me as a sighted person could discover in the full light of day — in fact, and in some ways, a good bit more; for I could pick up impressions and thought transference far more keenly and accurately than could most normal people with the full use of their eyes.

"Nevertheless, I wished that I could see her, just once, a picture to hold in my memory. Blindness has its compensations, though it is also a tightrope of frustrations, especially for the very young who generally have less on which to draw, and who can hardly help but feel life's apparent injustice.

"However, I was fortunate, for I had grown with a natural aptitude for living in my mind, and so accepted more easily the burden of being blind. Furthermore, I suppose I must have known my way about our house, garden and dispensary shed almost as well as my parents; since nothing was ever moved out of its appointed place without one of them first telling and showing me by touch.

"Thus, in our own garden and buildings, it was only rarely that I needed any help; in fact I could run and move about with such confidence that on several occasions, and on later learning that I could not see at all, unsuspecting guests had been taken completely by surprise.

"In actual fact there is nothing very clever or surprising about this ability: for just as people who are deaf naturally develop their quickness of observation, and other compensating skills, to assist in counteracting their disadvantage, so also will a blind

person offset his blindness, as far as possible, by developing chiefly his memory and visual imagination — though there are other balancing factors as well.

"But to return from my diversion: As I stood holding and fondling my rabbit there came upon me the thought, almost tangible in its intensity, that I must get one of our smaller chest-holding leads.

"I did not resist the impulse, so returned my rabbit to her cage, and then walked over to that part of the shed where I knew hung all our leads. These leads were only used occasionally, but were sometimes very useful in aiding convalescing animals to regain their strength and walk again, their weakness being helped by the upward pulling support of the lead in the hands of either my father or myself.

"I chose a lead which I knew could be adjusted to fit my rabbit, returned to her cage — still following my inner compulsion — took her out again and fastened it so that it was comfortable and did not restrict her movements, then set her on the ground with the leather loop in my hand.

"Then there began an adventure such as few can claim to have experienced, an adventure that you may well find hard to believe, and one, I must admit, which fills me with wonder even now. But it is true even so, and as fresh to me today as it was nearly sixty years ago when I was only ten years of age.

"Almost immediately I felt her tug at the lead, stretching her efforts towards the open door until her feet scuttered on the cold concrete. I followed, though stumbling a bit at first since I was unused to being led in such a way. However, by the time we were half-way down the path to the house and the front gate, I was learning to trail more easily, my

naturally sensitive fingers recording her wishes almost as instantaneously as they were sent.

"And so, in this unusual manner, we made our way past the house, through the front gate, and out into the open road which ran by our village.

"With only the barest hesitation my rabbit turned sharply to the left, hopped along the grass verge for a hundred yards or so, crossed the road, and then without warning, and with me following behind as best I could at the end of her lead, plunged into the wide stretch of open country and woods that rolled between us and our nearest church some two miles away.

"The light wind had dropped completely, its place taken by a frozen silence that hung in the still air like needled icicles; while the only discernible sounds on this wintry, Christmas night were the faint snow-muffled patter from my rabbit's hopping feet, her tiny panting as she strove against the heavy snow, the occasional creak and jingle from her harness, and the clumsy shush shush of my bedroom slippers as they swept aside the crisp snow, my feet tripping and fumbling over the unseen undulations and bumps in the ground.

"And so we pattered, hushed and lurched along, the long minutes dragging themselves out in the bitter weather, and with lengthening pauses for my rabbit to sniff the air and regain her breath; and I will not deny, in spite of all that had gone before, that I felt afraid. Indeed, I suppose it was hardly surprising: blind, a very cold night, sometimes plunging and staggering over ground which I would never normally have dared to cross alone, dressed only in pyjamas, dressing-gown and slippers; and finally, and perhaps

the most ridiculous of all, being led to some unknown destination by a rabbit on the end of a leather lead.

"Even my childhood's state, with its innocent trust and far, clear inner sight — enhanced, I believe, by my blindness — were sorely strained by this strange turn of events. However, I hung on to the wonderful memory of my rabbit's healing in the dispensary shed, to the curious and powerful link that bonded us together for some apparently quite definite purpose, and to all the uplifting thoughts and impressions which had so recently surged through me in such profusion.

"But nevertheless, my eager anticipation was still lightly tinged with fear; I could not help it, though I was angry at my weakness, and also the cold which was beginning to seep into me, so that my young limbs grew stiffer and my body shivered, as the icy air, and the cold snow in my slippers, worked their will upon my increasingly wretched state.

"My poor rabbit was also feeling the strain badly; for as a breed they have not much stamina, and I could tell by her more frequent pauses, and her harsher, rasping breath, that she was weakening under the extreme effort and cold even more than I.

"Time seemed almost to hang as still as the icy air around us, though Heaven knows we were active enough to ensure its unnoticed passing. But I think that my fear of being benighted, the lethargic and cramping effects of the chill night air, my clumsy blunderings, and our general suffering and weariness under the severe below zero conditions, froze my normal perceptions and put them out of balance.

"Consequently we halted more and more frequently, and on these occasions I took to picking up

my rabbit, holding her close inside my dressing-gown for what little warmth I could give her. But although I could feel her chilled body and sadly depleted strength, yet she would never remain with me for long, and would soon struggle to be put down again on to the inhospitable ground. My heart groaned for her, for it was as if she knew that she had a special mission to perform, and that her time and strength to carry it out were clearly limited.

"And so we struggled on, until we had been going for an hour or more. Our pace was pitifully slow, hampered as we were by my blindness, the snow and icy cold; and also by my poor rabbit who, by now, was forced to struggle desperately in the heavier drifts, while even on the harder, shallower snow her movements were slow and laboured.

"With my body half-frozen, and even the fear numbed from my mind, I had almost ceased to wonder at our final destination; our efforts confined mainly to ploughing heavily on through the ever-deepening snow.

"Instinctively my brain jumped at the impression of this last thought — 'Yes, the snow had been getting deeper; and our route too appeared to have been mostly downhill.' — The two facts together struck a chord in my memory: but I was tired and very cold, and my normally nimble mind slow and heavy from weariness and discomfort, so that its response was dim and unrecognizable.

"Besides, my main concern was for my rabbit who, worn and exhausted, as she so obviously was, still continued to battle over and through, what must have been to her an immense white ocean of sometimes firm, sometimes clogging, unending and undulating

mounds of snow — a rough sea of whiteness that seemed to go on for ever and ever.

"I could not help it: partially from my own weakness, though mainly for hers, I wept weakly in helpless distress and love for this wretched animal who, through a miracle, had been so recently snatched from suffering and death's door; but then only to be thrown back again into the fires of struggle and pain.

"I sorrowed for her with all the single-minded intensity and self-pity of the young. And yet, in some strange way, I felt no bitterness; for I knew that the hand of destiny lay strongly on us both; I knew that what was happening was right, and that God's will and infinite perception had planned and guided us over every inch of the course. Perhaps I knew more than I should have known; but I did at least know that what I knew I knew only through the uplifting experience of my rabbit's healing, and that my mind, for this while, had been tuned-in to a far higher than normal frequency.

"However, regardless of my spiritual state, the physical weighed on us just as keenly; and I could hardly help but become more and more aware that my hands were becoming impossibly numb and dead, so much so that I found it increasingly difficult to even feel the leather lead, and quite impossible to accurately sense my rabbit's progress from the tiny tremors and tugs which ran up this vital lifeline between us.

"I shifted the loop back over my wrist, my fingers nerveless and frozen, clumsily tightened the sliding band, and then forced myself to rely only on the coarser sensitivity in my arm. At first this did not

work very well, and sometimes my awkward movements would jerk my rabbit back on to her haunches, while at others I came dangerously near to over-running her when she stopped, or had to slow for one of the softer snow-drifts — all of which only added to her already almost intolerable difficulties.

"However, being blind, I was at least well-practised in the use of my physical nerves and intuitive senses; so it was not long before I managed to readjust to the more difficult circumstances, and cope better than before with my frozen hands.

"It was in such fashion that we progressed for a short while longer, the snow-drifts becoming softer and deeper, though slightly offset by the gradient which was descending more steeply. Nevertheless, it was heavy going, and my concentration so riveted on carefully following my rabbit, with nerves highly strung from my constant efforts, that it came as a jerking surprise when the lead suddenly grew taut, snatching at my wrist, as she slipped over the edge of an embankment.

"For a moment I stopped still in my tracks, her feebly struggling body dangling from the end of the lead, frightened and not knowing what to do. However, and before I could recover my wits, I too felt the snow-packed ground shift, and then slide away from beneath my feet. Frantically I struggled to clamber back; but it was too late, and a second later the snow beneath my feet subsided completely, cascading down the embankment in a shower of loose snow and grit, and carrying with it my own helplessly flailing body.

"I landed on my seat with a horrible bump, the loop of my rabbit's lead still firmly around my wrist,

and followed by a veritable torrent of snow, small stones, dead leaves and twigs; all of which briefly rained down on my head and shoulders, and with more than a fair portion of its icy content slipping down my neck, so that I involuntarily cried out in fear and shock.

"Fortunately for my rabbit, I could not have sat there very long, even though I was a little dazed: it was too uncomfortable, with my bottom grazed and bruised from its unwelcome slither and impact, and several pounds of loose, frozen trash filling a good deal of my tucked-in pyjama top, girdling my waist in an icy grip, and causing me to gasp for breath.

"In any case, this night, and in my anxiety, I was more than usually single-minded, and in consequence was almost immediately beset by a stark inrush of fear for her, which soon pulled me to my senses.

"As quickly as I could, though carefully, for I did not wish to tug the lead and hurt my rabbit, I scrambled somewhat painfully to my knees, loosened my pyjama jacket, thereby releasing nearly all of its cold contents on to the ground, and then crawled slowly back to the other end of the lead.

"A few seconds later I found her, unharmed, though buried under some six inches of loose fallen snow, and so weak and cold that she could not possibly have struggled free on her own. Had we not been together, she would undoubtedly have suffocated to death in a very short time.

"But I was there, and, as gently as I could manage with my numbed hands, I lifted her free of the cumbering snow, brushing away the remaining fragments with my free hand. Then, although my own body had little enough warmth left in it, I drew her

close to me, next to my skin, and pulled around us both my pyjama jacket and dressing-gown.

"She stirred, but her movements were very weak, and I knew that her life hung only by a slender thread. Then and there I made up my mind, regardless of my blindness and its consequences, that I would not again put her on the ground and let her hop ahead — although I doubt, in fact, whether she could have managed it anyway, in spite of her indomitable spirit.

"Holding my precious burden close, I got unsteadily to my feet. There was something around me that seemed familiar, though I could in no way pin down its tantalizing tendrils as they whispered in my mind. Sniffing the air, I stretched my senses to their uttermost; and then, to my slight surprise and without any apparent volition from myself, I took a cautious pace forward, and then another, and yet another; my confidence growing with every step for no reason that I could explain.

"After three or four slow paces I knew, by the feel under the soles of my feet, that I stood on the edge of a snow-covered tarmac road. Nevertheless, doubtful of myself, I slipped one foot out of its slipper, and scratched through the loose surface until I felt the brittle grit scrape against my skin.

"Still wary, though with a more rapidly-beating heart, I reflectively slid my foot back into the damp slipper. Pictures and impressions were darting about before my eyes as my sleepy memory stirred: I knew that I had walked this way many times before on the way to church with my father, and that somewhere, near this spot where I now stood, was the little path where we normally left the road and crossed the

country to our house.

"I also realized that the church must lie to my left — but how far? I had very little idea, for there was no way of telling whether I was to the right or left of the path we used, and even my senses, acute as they were, were of little help to me in this quandary.

"Still, I did at least know that our small Norman church, with its few houses scattered near by, lay somewhere down the road to my left — unless, of course, we had struck the road lower down on the other side of the hamlet. But this I refused to believe, for I had never before been there on foot, whereas this spot, where I now stood, rang loud and clear bells in my memory.

"My mind made up, and holding my rabbit close to me, I walked a little way out into the road, hoping that a car had passed recently, and that I could then follow in its wheel-tracks. I was lucky, too lucky possibly, for several cars had passed this way since a fall of snow that afternoon; consequently, although I could follow in their tracks easily enough, I soon found it almost impossible to differentiate between one wheel's line and another; and I felt rather like a railway-engine crossing junctions which, even though they went in approximately the same direction, none the less guided my feet from side to side of the road — since the various drivers who had passed this way had found it necessary to carefully pick their own erratic routes over the slippery surface.

"Cold and shivering in the icy air, I soon became thoroughly sick of weaving along like an old drunk on a dark night: a very slow method of progress, and one that caused me increasing anxiety by its stupid delay, and therefore for my rabbit too, who, though she

might have been a little stronger, could not have drawn much heat from my own chilled body, nor much protection from my largely sodden nightwear.

"Stooping, I pushed off first one slipper, and then the other, gathered them up in my free hand, and walked on down the road with bare feet; feeling my way very carefully, and more accurately, down one particular car's tracks. I found this much easier, and was not led astray nearly so often by the many other wheel-marks, which usually led in and out of mine at only a fine angle.

"But I was walking on borrowed time, and knew it: for my feet were not hardened and thick-skinned, and were, even before I had removed my slippers, very cold. It could hardly be long before they became so numb that they lost all sensitivity to the tyre's pattern I followed, when I would have to again encase them in my slippers, ending up in an even more insensitive position than I was in before I had taken them off.

"So I resolved to move on as fast as I was able; and it was only occasionally that my forced speed brought about an error, compelling me to either retrace a step or two, or push on through the loose, uncrushed snow in the direction which, I guessed, must again bring me back to the special tracks I sought.

"I found at first, even in my cold, numbed and tired state, that there was quite a thrill in walking barefoot through the snow; and even more so in their being able to act as my guide, and in place of the sight which I lacked.

"But this tepid thrill did not last very long; for after perhaps five or ten minutes my feet became very

numb, and far less sensitive to the imprints of the tyre's tracks. So I took to stamping, about every third pace, to restore the circulation: this worked all right, but it was an agonizing path that I trod, with every stamp a bloody thrust on the half-frozen veins in my feet — a searing, thousand pringles of pain that brought the tears to my eyes, and my teeth clamping determinedly down on my lower lip.

"I could only guess at how far I walked in this slow and painful manner; though it was quicker than before, so I would not put on my slippers. Time and distance almost ceased to be, though I knew well enough that my own slender strength was being sapped at a ferocious pace.

"But at last the road began to swing sharply to the right, and I immediately knew exactly where I was. Here, too, there was a proper camber, so I was able to leave the car tracks and walk on with confidence down the centre of the road, holding my rabbit to me with both arms in case she should slip and fall from my weakening grip.

"The church was the nearest building, in fact the only building I had been into in this tiny hamlet, and I knew that I should be able to make it there without too much difficulty. So I stopped, dropped my slippers to the ground, and gratefully slid my feet into them: I had no further need of the wheel-tracks, since now I had only to keep on the high camber of the road and judge the distance to the church; both comparatively easy tasks for me.

"Nevertheless, for a moment I waited and listened: it was strange, for even in such close proximity to people, though the houses around were fairly widely scattered, there were no sounds that I

could hear save from nature herself — a distant, lonely hoot from an owl, a sudden crack from some over-stressed and internally freezing tree, the odd plop of falling snow from an over-weighted branch.

"The silence weighed on me heavily, so that I was inclined to feel depressed and spiritless, and even more aware of the freezing air, my weary body, and a haunting loneliness inside myself. It was indeed a strange silence that brooded over this Christmas night; though not one which contained in it any evil, only a vacuum, a limbo, common to all, through which I knew I had to pass.

"However, I was very young, and did not pause for long to probe the atmosphere in depth, for I knew that the night would overcome me if I dallied on the way. Fortunately, too, my rabbit, slightly warmer and stronger now, chose that moment to stir and move her limbs more vigorously than I had supposed her capable.

"Plainly her instinct was to lead me from the ground; but I would not release her to fatally spend her tiny strength. First we would go to the church, which would provide some shelter from the cold; and from there perhaps I would be able to find our padre — though I doubted it, since he lived some distance away.

"Not that it mattered very much: the night was already far spent, and there must be cassocks and warm gowns there in which we could wrap ourselves, allowing us to sleep away the rest of the dark hours in comparative comfort.

"I delayed no longer, but continued my walk down the road, instinctively feeling and measuring the distance to the church.

"My feet felt numbed and leaden now that they were back in their slippers; though this was of little consequence to me, for I had only to feel the slope of the road with my legs and body, and can only remember being very relieved at no longer having to suffer the agonies of stamping them to life.

"A minute later, two perhaps, and I felt that I should be opposite the church gate on my left. Turning in that direction, I stepped forward very slowly, my left hand extended to buffer any obstruction, my right holding and supporting my rabbit.

"The tarmac slipped away under the grass verge, my feet brushing cautiously over the snow-covered mantle. Was my judgement wrong? I had never dared, nor was I allowed, to walk alone anywhere outside the precincts of our own garden and house; so all I had to go by was my careless memory from the times I had often walked this way with my father, hand in hand for the most part. Now I wished that I had taken more conscious note of distance and pace, and thereby not have to rely almost solely on my instinctive judgement, highly developed as it was.

"Leaves, and a light shower of snow as my left hand came into contact with a hedge — 'So I was wrong, my judgement at fault' — still, I would not credit that I could be far from the gate I sought — 'But which way? Uphill or down?'

"I decided to follow the hedge down the hill, if for no better reason than for the sake of my protesting legs; for they felt like ice-encased sticks, stiff and cold, and were most unwilling to retrace any part of the way and labour back; besides, only my left hand was free at present, and this was the hand I would need to follow the hedge down the hill.

"Save for the fact that I had to lift my feet high to avoid tripping over the heavy tussocks of grass, I found little difficulty in walking slowly on, running my hand along the hedge, and followed by a steady shower of feathery snow as the little branches leapt and sprung back into place.

"One, two, three; I think I must have covered nine or ten paces before the hedge came to an abrupt halt, and my hand ran on to the church gate-post instead.

"You cannot imagine the sigh of relief I gave; at last I had found what I sought, and largely on my own too. Oddly enough I felt also that this was exactly where my rabbit wanted me to be — the impression's source was nebulous, though perhaps it came from a sense of contentment which I subtly gleaned from her as she lay snugly in the crook of my arm.

"Sliding my hand along the gate's middle bar, I found the latch, lifted it, and pushed open the old wooden gate on its slightly creaky hinges. Stepping around its edge, I walked up the short and bumpily-paved path, easy enough to feel even through its covering of snow, and very soon had my hand on the church door.

"I pushed — but it was about as immovable as the Rock of Gibraltar. A brief tremor of fear pulsed through me, though I remembered well enough that our padre never locked it: he had said so on many occasions, and that anyone was free to enter whenever they wished, day or night.

"So I felt around for the door handle, the mellowed wood sliding easily under my hand like a few open leaves of a long-dated story book. Eventually I found it, though it was higher than I

expected; a great iron knob that, with my left hand only, and all my strength, I could not turn. Indeed, I could scarcely cover the enormous thing.

"Realizing that the task was quite beyond me while I held my rabbit, I gently lifted her out of my gown and placed her on the ground. She seemed stronger, and not too cold. Then, with her lead still looped over my right wrist, I put both hands on the knob and twisted it firmly.

"It turned, and the heavy old door swung inwards as I let it go. Picking up my rabbit again, I stepped over the low sill and into the church, pausing only to swing the door shut again with a metallic crash from its latch, and a heavy thud from its substantial timbers."

* * * * *

The old priest looked tired, he paused, and then swept one hand across his forehead. He had been speaking already for the better part of an hour, and through his words had re-lived this incredible and fascinating experience; one that no listener could doubt, for its telling rang with truth, and his voice, though almost languid, and of no outstanding timbre, had a mystical, faraway tone that gripped and held his congregation as though in a semi-trance; so that they too, at least in part, and each to his, or her, own ability and capacity, lived his story to some degree of fullness.

But it was taking its toll, and there was an increasing hint of a dragging weariness as he retold the long trudge through the snow, re-experienced the bitter cold that had eaten into him so severely,

suffered again under his almost unspoken fears, and lived once more the tension of every thought and doubt that must have preyed upon his young mind of the past.

His congregation waited patiently, while the old priest took time to recover and collect his thoughts; for many of them loved him dearly, while nearly all, at least, held him in high respect.

There was a slight stir from the packed benches; though not born from impatience, but rather from anticipation and a natural need to change position.

But of all this the old priest seemed to be totally unaware, his face a mirror to his strung and tangled thoughts; until at last they burst loose as he raised his arms and spoke again, his voice low and soft, though growing stronger as he gathered up the reins.

"What can I say? How can I ever adequately frame in words what befell me in that church? A task that grows no easier as one Christmas follows upon another. And yet I must" — and here his hands fell again to his sides — "for it is the only medium I have to guide and show you past the realms of time and space; the only way through which I might, however clumsily and imperfectly, leave you with a flashing glimpse into the Mind of God: so I will do my best, and endeavour to bring to life in words alone what I saw and experienced."

Again he paused before tackling the task that lay before him, but this time only briefly.

* * * * *

"Not immediately did I become conscious of any change beyond what I would normally have expected.

But gradually, and as I felt my way up the centre aisle, I became aware of a subtle and delicious warmth that stole about me; soothing away my tiredness, and painlessly drawing the cold from my body and limbs; and all this with no more reaction than a pleasant tingle that ran briefly through me from my head to my feet, leaving me afterwards with a most complete sense of well-being.

"No words can do justice to this experience: it was overwhelming, and yet I was not overwhelmed; indeed, I had never felt in finer balance with myself.

"In fact, of course, this was no ordinary warmth, not at all like the heat from a fire, or even that of a beautiful summer's day. No, there was something altogether different about this, some power that held within itself more than the simple properties of heat, more than even an invigorating fragrance; rather did it contain qualities, so widely varied and extensive, that they reacted on my whole self as a harmonizing, healing and strengthening balm.

"No part of me was left to chance, none from the finest quiver in my spirit, to the near-dormant blood in my hands and feet.

"I had already stopped feeling my way up the aisle, and now, almost instinctively, turned to sense and seek out this strange and wonderful source of power; at the same time lifting out my rabbit from inside my dressing-gown, so that she, too, might be filled with life.

"For a moment I held her in my open arms; then placed her on the ground at my feet, the lead still looped around my right wrist. She seemed to be stronger and warmer, though in my own re-vitalized state, I could not help but feel that probably I was

only a poor judge of hers. Indeed, my own transformation had been so swift, and so entirely effective after the hours of increasing cold and exhaustion, that I found it hard to even imagine my rabbit in any other than a similar state herself.

"Wrapped about, as I was, in this cloak of spiritual power and substance, I found it hard to sense its source. However, my rabbit very soon dispelled any doubts I had as what to do next. A light, though firm, tug on the lead, accompanied by a faint scrabble from her paws on the stone floor, as she sought to pull my inert self on the instant, and I was following her up the aisle towards the altar with its lovely wooden crucifix.

"Our parish priest had once taken me by the hand and let me feel this symbol of the Crucifixion; and I remember very clearly its beautiful carving, so realistic and perfect under my drifting hands, that I could almost feel the agony that Jesus must have suffered as He hung there.

"As I recalled this incident, I again felt drawn towards this emblem; so that it was no surprise to me when my rabbit led me on past the last of the benches, over the short space between them and the steps, and then up the three low steps themselves to the altar.

"Here she stopped, and scratched at my slipper as soon as I pulled up beside her, my chest only a few inches from the altar. I bent and picked her up, for I knew this was what she wanted; and then, with no conscious premeditation, placed her on the altar table and reached to touch the Crucifix.

"For a moment my hands wandered empty, for I was not standing before the middle of the altar, but

somewhat to its left. However, soon my carefully questing fingers touched on its base, and I reached behind and gently pulled until it stood before me, so that I was not so stretched and it was more within my reach.

"I remember being surprised at its lightness; for though about eighteen inches in height, it had been carved from some fine-grained, light-weight wood; almost certainly not of English origin, at least from no timber that I knew, and I was acquainted with most of them, even at that age.

"Anyway, the Crucifix before me, and my rabbit sitting somewhere to my right, my fingers crept slowly up the stem of the Cross; up and over Jesus' feet and the single, terrible nail that pinned them to the wood; up again to his twisted and tortured body, wracked with pain, and fighting for every breath that, while He lived, He had to draw; along His arms as they lay stretched and distorted, clasped brutally to the beam by two heavy iron nails driven savagely through His wrists; and then back to His shoulders, one slightly higher than the other I noticed.

"And what went on in my mind all this time, while the soft, perfectly formed wood glided under my sensitive fingers? . . . Visions of the Crucifixion scene? Or of Christ as He hung there in His agony?

"No, not really; in fact rather was I filled with the magnitude of The Man; His vast love that encompassed the World, and which seemed to flow into me, even through the dead wood; His immense stature and wisdom that stood astride the Universe, and yet that was great enough and humble enough to live a while with Man — to teach us and show us the way; and then to be scourged, mocked and scorned; and lastly

most cruelly and slowly done to death by those whom He came to save.

"Of course, my child's mind did not receive these impressions in quite the way that I have interpreted them to you. But who can translate fully into words the finer impressions and thoughts of any person? I cannot even translate my own, and even less as I received them as a child.

"Our minds flit fast and free, far beyond the clumsy words of speech, which can only serve, however skilfully phrased, as a very poor medium of interpretation. Between these wide-gapped lines we must seek and search and feel, for the greater lies therein; whereas the slender words themselves can serve only as a link, one that is easily strained and distorted to serve the listeners' needs.

"So forgive my sometimes clumsy speech, and try, I pray you, to see that which I can in no way completely express.

"With a slight tremor of nervousness, though I knew not why, I let the fingers of my left hand wander up to the carving of Jesus' head. Almost immediately I felt my hand held and drawn, like filings to a magnet; and then, before I could even wonder at this mystery, a blinding flash shot across my inner sight, but gone again in the breath of a moment: and I found that I could see.

"Yes, in one lightning-swift miracle, I could see; though not, I think, as all of you can see — and this I knew without knowing why, at least at first, for the altar before me shimmered; everything, the walls of the church, the benches, even the floor, shimmered and were partly translucent to my gaze.

"I knew that this was not the way that normal

eyes saw, for there was life in everything about me; and even colour too, though I should not have known what colour was — yet somehow I did, and was in no way astonished that I did.

"How could such things be? How could so many mysteries tangle and twine so smoothly, so that only on reflection did they appear as mysteries?"

"Well, I think at this point I must jump my story for a while, for we cannot leave such questions totally unanswered: At the time, and as a child, I accepted this transformation as something that my memory recognized, and therefore agreed.

"Afterwards, of course, when this experience lay behind me, my inquisitive mind set out to find some explanation; not for the miracle, for this was God's affair and blessing; but rather to find the sort of sight that I received.

"The full answer only came to me slowly over the course of many years, and not so much from the tongues of others, as through my own inner searching and reflection. I cannot even say exactly when I knew; for the fullness of this knowledge, or at least as much as I am meant to know, crept upon me stealthily, climaxing somewhere between my years of twenty-five and thirty.

"Put briefly, and without long explanation, the sight was such that I already possessed, one that most of us possess to a greater or lesser degree: the unconscious gift of spiritual sight; the sight we had before we were born; the sight we often use in dreams, but rarely remember; the sight that lies above this earthly frame; the sight that sees beyond this World and its mass of whirling complex atoms; the sight which allows us to see from at least one step up the

ladder, and more if we are able — the greater vista beneath our feet, the nobler Heaven above our heads.

"This was the sight which God gave me in full consciousness; and, because of its unexpectedness, at first I saw everything in a shimmer. But in a little while the shimmer steadied and disappeared, and colours grew and swelled; colours of every shade and hue; colours that I doubt we have on Earth, though I cannot see them to compare; colours that flowed and merged in such translucent harmony that they fed my very soul."

* * * * *

"You see," said the old priest, smiling warmly on the people who looked up at him; "how can I describe even these colours to you? What means have I to show you what I saw, and still hold clearly in my mind?"

"Only my poor self as witness to these things, or mayhap the gift and rhythm of my words; perhaps these may steal a little of the colour? May show you something of what I would gladly give my life to share?"

* * * * *

"I swiftly grew accustomed to this new sight of mine, and looked along at my rabbit as she sat on the altar to my right. What a lovely creature she was, small, but perfectly formed, and with a most lustrous coat of brown.

"Of course, I saw her, as I saw all things, with a

higher sight than mortals normally have on Earth. Consequently my seeing was nearer to God, more penetrating, more revealing; so that she appeared more perfect and in shining health, as was indeed her higher state — for she, too, had been lifted up, and together we shared this finer ether.”

* * * * *

The old priest paused a moment — his last. Suddenly there was an ear-splitting crack that rang deafeningly around the old church walls, and he reeled back against the pulpit, recovered, and then stood holding on to the wooden railing, swaying slightly, while a dark red stain spread slowly over his upper chest, and his brilliant eyes, sightless though they were, dulling under the bullet's mortal blow.

Meanwhile, events were falling thick and fast, and while most of the congregation had been driven explosively to their feet by the shock of what was happening before their eyes, though too numbed and dazed for action, the two bad men in the front row were locked in a desperate grapple, staggering and reeling by the pulpit and towards the altar steps; the smaller of them cursing and swearing as he fought, while the larger was both grim and silent, and with such a look of anger on his face as to set back any who might have moved to interfere.

Nevertheless, it only lasted a few seconds; for while the bigger man was the stronger of the two, yet the smaller had the gun, and was as lithe and agile as a cat.

With a jerking twist he broke his gun-arm free from the big man's grip, and then, quick as a flash,

rammed the barrel into his opponent's stomach and pulled the trigger — a second crack split the air, though more muffled than the first, and the big man relaxed, his face contorted in agony as he slid slowly to the floor at the foot of the lowest altar step.

But even before his body had subsided to the ground, the double murderer had broken free of his companion's weakened grip, and covered at least ten yards down the aisle, his face a fearful and twisted mask of fanatical hatred and madness.

Some of the bolder men in the congregation were beginning to recover their senses by now, and made some feeble attempts to stop the running madman. But the speed of his exit, and their natural fear of being shot down, delayed their hands; so that in those moments of indecision, he was gone out of the church door and up the path to the main road.

As soon as he had left there followed a temporary state of chaos; about half of the women and children screaming hysterically, while most of the men milled about helplessly like lost sheep — some staring up at the old priest as he clung silently to the pulpit rails, while others peered down at the second victim as he rolled about in pain-twisting agony, a fast-spreading pool of blood about his thighs and waist.

But then the local village doctor, and some others, rose to the occasion to restore order by firm, and even forceful means where necessary. One of them phoned from the vestry for both the police and an ambulance, while others guided and drove the people out of the church. Meantime, the doctor, after only a brief glance at the man on the floor, went to the old priest as he still hung on grimly to the wooden railings, his face a deathly white.

He was aghast at the terrible damage wrought by only two bullets, even though of heavy calibre; for neither man, as his experienced eyes told him only too clearly, could last more than five or ten minutes at best.

"Father, can you hear me?" said the doctor, standing at the foot of the pulpit and looking up into the old man's face.

"Yes — yes, I can hear you," came the faint and distant reply.

"Then let me help you down, you can lie more comfortably on the floor until the ambulance arrives; it should be here in twenty minutes or so."

A faint smile twitched the priest's pallid lips. "Help me down by all means; but I doubt if I'll be here when the ambulance arrives, and you know it too. But first tell me about the other man who was shot; is he badly wounded? How did it come about? Quickly, please, I don't think I have very long."

The doctor was a wise and experienced man, instantly recognizing the situation at its true reality and worth; so never stopped to quibble the matter, but in quick, concise sentences told the old priest all that he had seen from three benches behind the two bad men.

"Will he live? Is he conscious now?" asked the dying priest.

The doctor again looked over at the big man as he lay on the floor, weaker now, and apparently bleeding less; though the thick red carpet, laid up the aisle to the altar, had already absorbed much of his blood, leaving the stone floor deceptively dry. He noted all this before he replied — "He's just conscious; but I doubt if he'll live more than a few minutes,

not even under the most ideal circumstances could he last much longer."

"Then what are we waiting for?" asked the old priest a trifle brusquely, though his voice was pitifully weak. "Help me to him, please."

The doctor could not help looking a little surprised; but said nothing, and walked round the pulpit and up its four steps.

"Come along," he said, having reached the old man's side, "let me put my right arm round your waist, and we'll get your left over my shoulder."

He chattered on, ducking under the priest's arm as it lay across to the pulpit railing, at the same time grasping him firmly about the waist, and noticing, as he did so, that faint, intangible odour of pending death which, even now, permeated the air to his sensitive nostrils.

"I have you now," said the doctor; "lean on me as heavily as you like."

And so the mortally-wounded priest was helped down from the pulpit, slowly, step by step; and the doctor, in spite of his own severe medical verdict, could not help but be shocked at the degree of weight leant on him, for he had to virtually carry the man, so utterly spent was he.

Nevertheless, he was strongly built, and though the steps and route he followed were difficult and cramping under such conditions, yet he managed to keep on talking, doing his best to give the impression that his burden was light, and only needed a little help.

At the bottom of the pulpit steps the doctor silently warned away other willing helpers with a negative flash of his eyes and a faint shake of his

head, while still keeping up his light and steady rain of encouraging words.

Only three yards to go to the lowest altar step, and the man who lay nearly still in his own partially soaked-up pool of blood.

"Let me kneel by his head," said the old priest; "but help me, I pray you, for I have not the strength to kneel alone."

So he was gently lowered to his knees, held and supported by the doctor on his right and another man on his left.

"Guide my hand to his head."

They did this service for him, at the same time holding his body firmly in an almost horizontal position.

The big man on the floor was not yet dead, though fearfully pale and weak from loss of blood, and the shock from his suddenly ripped and torn stomach. His eyelids fluttered under the priest's hand, fluttered and opened, the light behind them dim but sane.

Once, twice he licked his lips and tried to speak, his throat working feebly; but no sound came.

"Let me bend lower," said the priest quietly, sensing the struggle under his hand.

They did as he asked, though the more contorted position was obviously very painful and harmful to his own severe injuries.

"Tell me what you want to say, whisper in my ear if you cannot speak."

Again the big man struggled desperately, and this time succeeded, though his voice was barely audible to the close ring of men kneeling about him, halting, and at one moment quick and the next slow.

"Father, forgive me. It was the singing, the

beautiful music, that brought me to your church. I should not have come in with the other man, for he hates all churches and priests; but he followed me, and I never thought that such a tragedy could occur."

"My son," replied the old priest simply, "you are forgiven."

"But will God forgive me too? I haven't been a good man, you know." The big man's voice was fading fast, his eyes beginning to glaze; yet still there was such a tone of pathetic, helpless pleading, that all who heard were drawn to him on that instant.

"Yes, God has forgiven you too; for your heart, in spite of the past, is now washed clean and white and free from sin," replied the old priest, his own voice trembling under the strain. "Besides, if I, a mere man can forgive you; then how much more readily will almighty God forgive and receive you back into His fold."

For a short while there was silence, while all wondered if the big man had heard. But he had, and once more his eyelids feebly opened, and for the last time his voice struggled for speech — "Thank you, Father." He paused, gathering up the last of his strength. "That was a beautiful sermon; what a pity I never listened and sought before, what a pity."

Then he gasped, flexed and arched his back, and died with no more than a brief, indistinct rattle in his throat.

With a truly tremendous effort the old priest made the sign of the Cross over the dead man, muttering some prayers at the same time.

But this last rash expenditure proved too much,

and he slumped helplessly in a faint, momentarily dragging down the arms of his two supporters.

"Lie him down quickly," said one of the onlookers; "if he can rest he may recover enough to live."

"We'll lie down by all means," replied the doctor sadly. "But I fear he won't recover. Here, lift him carefully on to the top step under the altar, he would wish no better resting place himself."

Lovingly and painstakingly they did as he bid; and, when the old priest lay there, his breathing bubbling from the effects of substantial internal bleeding, the doctor came again and gently wiped away some flecks of blood and saliva which had gathered about his lips.

Nobody spoke, there was nothing to say, for every man's heart was aflame with love for this old priest; indeed, it would be impossible to judge who loved him the most, for he had won all their hearts in different ways; his gentle, kindly nature, keen mind, and sharply perceptive spirit, had gathered them all within his powerful walls, so that each was to his own needs a welcome guest.

Without him they felt naked and lost, and like children remembered his sermon of the day, Christmas day. They recalled the story well, his story, a living segment of his life, though unfinished.

'And yet,' the doctor thought, and spoke his thoughts aloud, 'it doesn't need to be finished, for the book is not yet closed, perhaps it never will be. We learn in snippets, a little here, a little there, and grow in depth and breadth; and who will measure at last the length of our learning? The breadth and greatness of the spirit within us? When God is infinite, then where is the end? In truth, this

man walked with Christ, and in His company kept himself unspotted from the World.'

The old priest stirred, and everyone immediately turned their attention to him.

"God bless you all," came his tired voice; and then he too died, but so quietly and peacefully that for a while none of them knew that he had passed on to the other side. None save the doctor, though he was silent, for his heart was broken and he could not speak.

* * * * *

A few days later the murderer was caught and locked away, his only claim to posterity being a short paragraph in the local newspaper:

Two men died in a country church yesterday. The men, the vicar of the church and a visitor, had been shot. Police have apprehended a man and taken possession of a gun. The shooting took place following a scuffle before the pulpit of the church. A police spokesman said the man they have apprehended appeared to be 'unbalanced'. The man's identity is still uncertain.

* * * * *

And so ends the saga of one good man and two bad men; how briefly their lives tangled, and changed; how one fell away and sank into the pit of darkness; and how the other was drawn upwards by the good man — the sinner who sought mercy and forgiveness, and a whole new life to start again.

LOST VOYAGE

The elderly man's head nodded tiredly as he sat comfortably before the roaring log fire in the school staff-room: to all appearances he had fallen asleep; but appearances can be deceptive, and, as had so often happened before, familiar voices droned on and drifted around him; usually on mundane school matters, though sometimes they touched on him personally: but when this happened he never let anyone know that he had heard, even though it was through no wish of his own that they spoke of him in his presence.

But he felt tired now, tired deep inside himself as his age and full life wrapped themselves yet more closely about him; consequently he had let himself slip into one or two comfortable habits, like this one: a doze after dinner while his mind wandered back over the long years; in such introspective fashion did he recall this or that experience, be they tinged with pain or touched with gentle memories, all were recalled, examined or sifted at some time or other — not with the raw mind of bitterness, but rather with the touch of the understanding master who had seen more, experienced much, and dug more deeply into

each phase of life, until finally they had all yielded up their secrets of grace and truth to his gently probing fingers.

In this half-world of twilight voices reached him almost as though from another life, and as though he were no part of them, nor they of him . . .

"Wish somebody would tell that silly old goat about wearing his slippers in the staff-room, and then kicking them off," sniffed Miss Clark acidly; "it just isn't done in decent society," she sneered with considerable venom . . .

'Poor Clark,' thought the old man with a wry inner chuckle; 'with her little pin-headed ideals of class and society, and her utterly mundane outlook, she has become a veritable vixen in bondage to herself and the World' . . .

"Oh, I've tried," put in smooth-tongued Mr Bowman, Art master to the school; "but it's no use you know, he's an absolute law unto himself and won't listen to anybody."

"Well, I think he's rather an old dear; and ever so interesting if you can get him to talk about some of his adventures," piped up Mary Desart cheekily, though with a flash of protective anger in her eyes. "Also, well, he's just the kindest man I've ever known, and a real gentleman."

Mary spoke with some heat, and the critical couple stood silent and temporarily cowed; while the others waited with some relish at the discomfiture of the not over-popular pair.

But Mary did not appear to notice the tension, nor for the moment her surroundings — "Do you know," she said quietly, "he recently told me about his son, a shipwreck, and a dolphin who tried to save their lives.

It was the bravest and most beautiful story that I have ever heard . . . but I'm not going to tell it to you lot!" she flashed, "and in any case, if he had wanted you to know he would have told you himself."

With that she swept bravely from the room, leaving some distinctly embarrassed people behind her.

'Ah,' smiled the old man to himself, 'well done, Mary; God bless you for your great heart, and thank you from mine' . . .

The voices around him droned on; but he was no longer even half listening; instead his mind was away with the poignant memory that she had been instrumental in his recalling: not that he could ever forget it, for had not his own dearly beloved son died at the time. So again, and with crystal clarity, the whole familiar sequence of scenes flowed before him, catching him up in its terror and heart-breaking pathos so vividly portrayed on the backcloth of his imagination.

* * * * *

Richard Hamilton and his son, Hamish, were travelling alone when their ship had hit a reef and sunk, sunk so quickly in the dead of night that she probably went down with virtually all hands. Save for the initial tearing and rending of steel plates being ripped apart at full speed, backed by some fourteen thousand tons, an eerie silence hung heavily over the scene in spite of the muffled sounds of chaos and screams which penetrated feebly to the outer air.

By the grace of God, Richard had been walking on deck that sultry night with his eleven year old son:

it had been hot in the cabin, too hot for sleep; also there had been an air of restlessness which had brooded throughout the ship during the whole evening, an insidiously dark mood which had unspokenly drawn them together even more than usual.

The first shock of impact had thrown both to the deck as the old ship too rapidly ground to a stop against some massive undersea obstruction. Quickly Richard scrambled to his feet, his dominating thought for Hamish's safety; instinctively he knew that damage to the ship was grievous, and they had not long in which to act; so he leapt to the nearest lifebelt, tearing at the retaining straps in his haste, and pulling Hamish towards him at the same time.

Soon the fastenings were loosened, and, with a quick hug and cheerful word to Hamish, he glanced back at the bridge on which showed the only signs of physical activity above decks, then, hand in hand, they clambered on to the ship's railings and sprang out and away as far as possible.

They hit the water with a fearful smack: the lifebelt was torn from Richard's grasp, though he hung grimly on to Hamish as they sunk deeper and deeper through the now turbulent water. Kicking off his shoes Richard struck out with all his strength for the surface; his light clothes hampered him, but even so, slowly, painfully slowly and with bursting lungs, the inseparable couple started rising; almost imperceptibly at first, but then faster and faster until together they broke surface, gasping for the precious air around them.

"Kick off your shoes, quickly as you can, we must swim away from the ship," gasped Richard

painfully to his son, and interjected with sucking gulps for air.

Hamish had fared better than his father from their sudden immersion; and, being quite a strong little swimmer, had little trouble in getting rid of his shoes — meanwhile Richard looked anxiously around him for the lifebelt, but it was nowhere to be seen in the dark.

The ship was already well down in the water and listing towards them; while a few passengers were now to be seen running wildly about the decks, though their cries were completely swallowed up by the terrible sounds of the ship's death throes: a deeply resonant gurgling and bubbling sound filled the air as the sea rushed through the great rent in her hull, filling engine room, stores, cabins and passage-ways with a hissing, roaring tidal wave against which no bulkhead could stand, nor human live — only too well could Richard imagine the absolute terror and chaos which must at this moment be reigning below decks: its only merit being that it would be quick and comparatively merciful towards its victims.

There was a deep fear in Hamish's eyes as they caught his father's reflected thoughts; but more than this, there was also an underlying trust which went a long way towards quelling his instinctive fear, and which caused Richard's heart to turn over as the impact of his responsibility, and love for this child, freshly overwhelmed any other encroaching emotion that might otherwise have predominated his senses.

"Come, we must swim quickly, there is no time to lose," he said shortly; though in his heart he feared they were attempting the impossible — for they were close to the ship, and she was sinking so fast that he

doubted they could clear even fifty yards before she finally went down, sucking all in the near vicinity with her.

But here the hand of fate stepped in with a reprieve, for scarcely had they laboriously covered ten yards in their dragging clothing — there had not been time to remove more than their shoes — than Hamish swam into the lifebelt.

Nothing could have come at a more opportune moment, and Richard's breathless, "Thank God!" was drawn with relief from the depths of his heart. Together they swam on, pushing the lifebelt before them, while behind the roar of inflowing water, bursting boilers, and great throaty gouts of escaping air, accompanied their steady paddling and the contrarily gentle lap of wavelets against belt and faces in the calm sea.

But very soon Richard became aware that they were battling against being drawn back towards the ship — with a quick, horror filled glance behind him he saw that the ship with its many passengers and crew was taking its final plunge, and that the terrible vortex which would finally mark the spot was beginning.

"Hold on to me tightly, Hamish!" cried Richard; who then, with frantic speed, slid his body through the lifebelt until it was around his waist.

This done he again spoke to his son, with an inner prayer that they might come out of this alive — "Listen to me quickly, for we have little time. When the ship sinks, which will be any moment now, it will suck a lot of water down with it, and us too if it can. This lifebelt will bring us to the surface again, but we may be dragged down quite a way before we

start to rise; you must therefore take a deep breath before we are pulled under, and this you must hold at all costs. Finally, you must hold on tightly to the belt and me as I will to you."

Richard looked longingly at his son, and smiled gently before kissing him on the cheek — "We'll come through this, don't worry."

Hamish bravely stifled the fear that was in him — "I'm not afraid, Dad," he lied; "at least not as long as we're together. You will hold me tightly though, won't you? because I may not be strong enough to manage . . ." but his eyes spoke his plea and fear even more eloquently than his words.

"Hamish, my dear child," said Richard calmly, though wracked with pity for the boy; "you need have no fear that I will let go of you, there's no force on Earth can tear us apart . . . There she goes!" he cried, as he saw the ship dip for its final plunge. "Now remember what I said, for there is no more time for speech."

The ship's passing was quick and merciful, not at all like the prolonged and gallant sinkings that one so often hears about, and as depicted by the over colourful imaginations of some enthusiastic authors. One minute she was there, and the next she was not; and the only signs of her passing were the dragging and whirling of the currents as they clashed and sucked, relentlessly pulling downwards all that came within their grasp; while all around were swiftly uprising mounds of water, to equally swiftly burst in great bubbles of released air.

Richard gripped Hamish firmly around his waist with one arm, held strongly to the lifebelt with the other, and twined his legs tightly about Hamish's

thighs — as one they would pass to the torment below, and as one they would rise and live again, or die and rise together.

Now the sea was as turbulent and insecure as falling in a dream; round and round they were twirled, then lifted high up on the crest of a great and virile wave, and hurled pitilessly against another inward curling monster directly above the heart of the stricken, sucking ship; more violent in its dragging death than ever it had been when alive, and riding on the sea and not below.

Down they sank together, and it was fortunate they were so closely linked, for it called on all Richard's resolution and strength to keep in mind and hold his son to him, not to let his grip be broken by the fearful battering, first one way, and then another by fiercely active current and counter current.

Richard lost all count of time, his mind singled to one dominating purpose. Dimly, as though from afar off, he heard and felt a heavy, dull thud and grinding. Strangely his mind recorded this and its cause: the ship had already grounded on a shelving sea bottom, and it was the very shallowness of the water which had caused this extreme and unusual turbulence.

This abrupt halt to the ship's downward plunge caused an almost equally severe reverse in current: now they were being spewed upwards to be thrust rudely and unwantonly to the surface, before being thrown aside into calmer water like so much flotsam — But Hamish now lay limp in his grasp, while, in the moment before being cast aside, Richard saw the boy's features in a flash of pale moonlit skin which

showed him near to death.

Under the effect of the counter-balancing currents the sea very quickly became calmer, save for the minor whirls and eddies which absorbed the last of the ship's plunging power, and there was little difficulty in Richard's keeping both their heads above water with the lifebelt to support them. But he was fearfully tired, never before had he been so utterly exhausted, every breath he drew was at once a relief and a gasping, tearing pain, calling for every ounce of his endurance to overcome.

Wearily Richard's eyes cast about for something more substantial to ride on than their lifebelt, something on which Hamish could lie and be revived; for though his son breathed, it was shallow and gasping, often rattling in his chest from the accumulation of water in his lungs. All about him in the night's gloom he could see odd pieces of buoyant wreckage, mostly deck chairs and the like, and quite unsuitable to his purpose.

Then, in the distance, almost at the limit of his sight in the dark, Richard spotted a flat, bulky object which heaved more gently to the swell, not bobbing and bouncing as do lighter articles. With limbs that felt as though they were under remote control, and muscles that would scarcely obey their mind's command, he feebly paddled and battled his way towards the distant flotsam; though he knew it must be closer than it appeared.

After some minutes it became apparent that the floating object ahead was one of the ship's life-rafts, intact and undamaged. Encouraged, and with renewed mental energy, Richard struck out with more strength: but only to be smitten with a paralysing and

slashing pain that cut across his forehead with such strength as to make his senses reel, and his grasp on Hamish momentarily slip. Dimly he was aware of a sharp cry of pain forced from his lips, before he let his head drop on to the lifebelt and Hamish's shoulder. Relaxing as much as he could under the circumstances, Richard waited for the pain to subside — this it did, slowly — and during this time of enforced patience he became aware of Hamish stirring in his arm, a sign of returning consciousness which brought relief and hope to his heart in spite of his crippling circumstances.

After a while Richard again started to paddle towards the raft, though weakly and slowly; while Hamish, now partially conscious, was violently retching sea water from his lungs.

"Hamish . . . Hamish!" called Richard, though his voice was barely above an urgent whisper; "can you help me? Don't answer if you can hear, but try and help me paddle to the raft ahead — I'm nearly done for."

There was no answer from Hamish, whose efforts were compelled only to coughing up water; but Richard felt his son's hand slide round his neck in that so-familiar way that he had when they were alone, while at the same time Hamish kicked out with his legs, growing stronger every minute, and considerably lightening Richard's task.

In such manner they at last reached the raft. Both father and son were exhausted and nearly spent; but Hamish's youth was reasserting itself and he was, at least to some extent, fast recovering from the ordeal and able to take over much of the labour from his father. In a pain-hazed world of semi-consciousness

Richard let his young son guide him to the raft; thereafter his recollections were so faint and bemused that he only grasped at vague memories of their efforts to clamber aboard. How it was done, when he scarcely had the strength to raise his arms, could only have been attributed to his son's love and words of encouragement, the little physical help that he could afford, and Richard's grim determination to clutch on to life for Hamish's sake.

But at least it was done, and their lifebelt hauled aboard, before Richard could finally allow himself to let go and unconsciousness to claim its overdue right.

For the rest of that night they slept in each others' arms for warmth and safety, and to the easy swaying of the raft. They had no food and no water; but for the moment these were not clamouring necessities, and their lack did not in any way intrude on their rest, nor the strength which flowed slowly back into their limbs.

* * * * *

The morning found a cloudless sky and several wheeling gulls. The sea was calm, though there was a light easterly breeze that rippled and dimpled the surface into a myriad wavelets, each one a part of the greater, but gentle swell that moved and still persisted. To the west there was a faint, dark haze which clung closely to the sea, fading away as it stretched to either horizon.

But of the ship there was nothing, not even an oil slick, only a few water-logged deck chairs and other trivial oddments: save for the great rent in her hull

she had sunk intact; the only signs of life were the many sharks which cruised over an area about a quarter of a mile away, the obvious scene of the tragedy and from where they must have drifted during the night.

Hamish was the first to wake; leaning on one elbow he looked at his father, relieved to see the colour partially back in his cheeks, and his breathing easy and regular. In the bright sunshine, reflecting and dancing from the blue water, it was not difficult to temporarily shake off the worst horrors of the night before: such is youth's resilience.

Hamish sat for a while gazing over the apparently peaceful scene before him; then he took off his shirt and vest and laid these over the lifebelt to dry, before venturing to wake his father who was now stirring uneasily.

"Dad, Dad! wake up; it's morning and we're both alive and well. Do you feel better now?" he asked anxiously, as he saw his father's eyes slowly open in awareness.

On the instant of awakening a strange premonition of loss swept across Richard's mind, inexplicable and sudden as it was he brusquely tried to banish it aside: but the feeling persisted. Gazing up at Hamish, his heart was moved with love for his son; none the less, to Richard's inner eye there was something strange about the lad: always had he been beautiful in his sight, for his purity and simplicity shone through in a way that was striking to all. Yet now it was as though his inner light had brightened, and the dull husk of body lay only as a wafer between the light of his soul and the World. Instinctively Richard feared the almost ethereal quality he saw, not for

itself, for it was beautiful beyond all earthly compare, but rather for what it implied.

He smiled at his son, raising his arms to him — "Hamish," he whispered . . . Gladly his son came to him, and they fondly embraced after their ordeal of the night before.

"You must put your shirt on now, Hamish," commanded Richard solicitously; "in this climate, and with sea water on you, you'll dehydrate and burn terribly in a matter of hours, and we have no water to compensate the loss."

"I am very thirsty, even now," replied Hamish, scrambling to his feet to do his father's bidding.

"Yes, I know, so am I, and we must hang on very carefully today. Perhaps they managed to radio an S.O.S. before the ship went down, in which case we are bound to be rescued soon," he replied confidently to encourage his son; though his own hopes, based on what he knew, and the very short time they could last on the open sea without water, were slim indeed. So quickly had the terrible train of events happened it was unlikely that any S.O.S. signal could have been received, for even an immediate listener to pick up the ship's message and position would have required a very high degree of efficiency.

"Dad!" exclaimed Hamish excitedly, "isn't that land over there?"

Hurriedly, but painfully, for his limbs were stiff, Richard broke off his depressing train of thought and got to his feet; balancing uncertainly on the rocking raft, he stared intently towards the west where Hamish pointed. With the furthering of dawn the mists had lifted, and the cloudy horizon, as it had appeared before, was now clearly a long, low coast-

line.

"Well done, Hamish! you're right. I should have thought of this myself; I remember yesterday the ship's daily chart showing that we would be standing close to the shores of East Africa; in fact we would have been in Mombasa this very evening," added Richard somewhat wistfully.

"But," he continued, turning to his son, "we have nothing to paddle with; we'll have to try and rip up a couple of boards" Though looking at the stoutly built craft he could not help thinking that the task was easier said than done, especially so since they had not a single tool between them, not even a penknife.

"There should be paddles, Dad; one on either side of the raft; I remember seeing them on the ship," said Hamish, getting down on his stomach and peering over the side: "Yes, here's one; I'll unstrap it."

To their great relief both paddles were in place, and it was the work of a moment for each of them to release one and bring them inboard.

"That's splendid," said Richard, relieved. "Now, if you sit on the right side and paddle, I'll go to the left and do the same. It will be easier if we work in time with each other, and less tiring; and don't go wasting your strength, Hamish," he cautioned; "remember we have no food or water to sustain us."

"How far is it to the coast, Dad?" he asked, settling himself down with a paddle.

"Hard to say, son; we're sitting very close to the water here, so our horizon must be very limited: I would say not more than ten miles or so, about six hours paddling; we should be there around one o'clock."

So they started paddling steadily, Richard giving the time and keeping his thrusts in proportion to his son's limited strength. But progress was slow, slower than Richard had optimistically predicted; for their raft had been designed to carry as many people as possible, rather than to be propelled through the water for any distance. The stern was square and, even though the forward section was curved into a blunt bow, yet the craft was heavy and cumbersome to move.

Still they made headway slowly, changing sides every half hour. After three such changes Richard saw that his son could not keep going much longer, so called a halt. They had covered at most about three miles, and the coast was perceptibly closer; nevertheless, the tropical sun combined with their exertions were taking a savage toll of their strength, and both Richard and Hamish were parched, dizzy and weakening fast; though largely, it is true, due to the debilitating effects of the previous night's trials and hardships.

"Hamish," croaked Richard hoarsely, "lie down and rest; we'll never make it to the coast without water . . . I can't help thinking that they would hardly keep these rafts without any water or provisions at all," he went on meditatively: "I'm going to have a closer look over the sides."

Hamish collapsed without a word, utterly worn out, though he managed an encouraging smile to his father; a smile that went through Richard like a knife: for he saw, in his anxiety to reach the shore, how severely he had over-estimated his son's strength; the lad had obviously been very close to the point of collapse for some time, only driven on by love for his

father and a determination not to let him down.

Richard knelt by his son, briefly stroking his forehead and hair with a hand which trembled, transmitting more clearly and deeply his feelings than any words. Then he crawled to one side of the raft and lay down to look over the side.

The raft had a total depth of about twelve inches, about half of which was under water. Richard tapped his way along the whole length of the boarded side to see whether there was any cupboard door: but there was nothing, though he continued to work his way up to the bow and down the other side, before starting on the stern as a final chance. But here he was more fortunate, for there were two obvious lockers with brass handles, one on either side.

With self-enforced patience Richard carefully opened the first one and pulled out a sealed tin which, judging by its weight and feel, was obviously food of some sort. The other locker contained the infinitely richer haul of two cans of water and two aluminium cups, about four gallons of freshwater in all. He left one can in its locker, and took out the other with a cup.

For the next quarter of an hour, with Hamish's head pillowed in his lap, Richard allowed his son to intermittently drink small quantities of the precious fluid, while doing the same service for himself. With only two people on board, and the shore in easy sight, there seemed little point in stinting themselves.

Hamish recovered quickly, and, when the two of them had slaked their terrible thirst, they turned their attention to the food. In this tin they found sea biscuits, chocolate, salt tablets and other concentrated foods, and had no difficulty in making a very

satisfactory meal.

"Well, we won't reach the coast by one o'clock; though we should have little problem in getting there by tonight," said Richard, more cheerfully than he felt in spite of their windfall, for there was still that nagging experience of apparent inner sight which had beset him early that same morning, and which, for all that he tried to reject what it implied, gnawed away unpleasantly and refused to be budged.

"Do you feel up to helping me out with the paddling for a while?" he asked; "unfortunately it's really a two man job, since I cannot easily keep stearage-way alone."

Hamish flushed: "Silly old Dad, always thinking of me and never of yourself as usual; of course I'll help; and I'm quite strong now," he replied, giving his father's arm an affectionate squeeze before taking his place with a paddle.

So they carried on steadily until the early afternoon and only a few miles from the shore; the surf, visible in the distance now, breaking over the coral reef they would have to cross. Since the current did not appear to be driving them out to sea, and as they were now both very tired indeed, Richard called for a more prolonged halt than usual; grateful for the respite they lay down side by side to relax.

Then the sharks arrived.

It was Richard who noticed them first; reflecting that they were very likely the same ones they had seen over the spot where their ship had sunk; and, as nearly all the passengers would have been drowned below decks, these ravening wolves of the deep were very likely frustrated at being thwarted of the bulk of their prey, while yet having had their appetites

sufficiently whetted to be fearless and dangerous.

Richard's suspicions were soon confirmed. At first there were only two of them, but very soon their numbers increased as more and more joined the original pair, until eventually there must have been thirty or forty. Neither did they swim in the normal fashion of sharks, lazily and gracefully like prowling wolves, upper fins easily and neatly slicing through the water; rather did there appear to be a common and blood-thirsty purpose bonding them into a unified herd bent only on satisfying their appetites.

Speeding round and round and under the raft, often turning to show their white bellies and vicious, razored jaws, Richard and Hamish occasionally glimpsed a cold and baleful eye surveying them in a truly frightening and hypnotic way.

Closer and closer they tightened their circles, until many of the sharks frequently bumped heavily into the raft, so violently in fact that Richard sharply ordered Hamish into the middle out of harm's way. Any further paddling was quite out of the question under the terrifying circumstances; for their paddles would only have been torn from their grasp, and with the very real risk of the paddler being pulled into the sea as well.

Therefore they both sat in the middle with their paddles; Richard's arm held firmly about Hamish, who was looking white and shaken. It is one thing to see sharks from the safe height of a ship's deck, but quite another to be virtually within their reach and on their own level; let alone to be the sole object of their attentions.

"Dad, I'm frightened," whispered Hamish, trembling slightly; "what are we going to do now?"

"My dear, there's nothing we can do but wait. This raft may be small, but it is very stoutly built, and I am sure we are safe where we are so long as we are careful not to let them knock us into the water when they bump the raft."

But Richard spoke with more confidence than he felt, for though he had travelled much, and seen a great deal, he had never before seen, and only very rarely heard of sharks acting in such a frenzied manner. Furthermore, he was not at all sure that they would not succeed in upsetting their raft: what he had told Hamish about their craft had been perfectly true, but they were very big sharks, and in a very ugly mood.

Then one of the sharks, larger and more savage than the rest, turned about some twenty yards away and sped towards the blunt bow of their raft like an express train; a moment before impact he flipped easily over on to his side and, with gaping jaws, knifed straight across the heavy timber, tearing away about a foot off the bow.

The jar was terrific, and both Richard and Hamish were thrown helplessly across the boards and into the sea — Richard, still maintaining a firm hold about his son's waist, managed to keep a grip with his other hand on the rope that looped itself around the raft.

The scene was one of absolute bedlam: the shark, whose mighty charge had torn away much of the bow, had also signed his own death warrant, for his side had been ripped open on the jagged wood, while the spurting blood stained the water in an extending and descending line of red which welled from within its vitals. Being entirely cannibalistic by

nature, most of the others sped after him, tearing away great chunks of living flesh in their ravenous greed.

Richard, however, was naturally unaware of this diversion, and strove desperately, in a fearful frenzy for Hamish's safety, to lift his son up on to the raft and away from the jaws of the savage predators below. But his movements were slow and his burden unwieldy; for Hamish, plucky and courageous though he was, was partially paralysed from the sheer shock of all that he had seen, and the violence of being hurled into the sea.

Around and below Richard there still swam some three or four sharks, rapidly closing in as they gained courage from each other. He kicked out strongly in an almost futile effort to frighten or distract them while he tried to lift Hamish — but time was pathetically short, for the sharks were maddened with blood and, in their natural element, masters of the deep.

Then suddenly, with a cold shudder of terror, he felt his right foot strike full on the back of a heavy, rough body swimming below; almost instinctively he thrust downwards to rid himself of the beast, thereby partially lifting himself and Hamish up on to the raft: but so great was the boy's numbing fear that he lost his hold and fell back on to Richard.

For the moment he was completely helpless as the waters closed over his head, even losing his hold on the raft. Around him he was horribly aware of blurred grey shapes which turned and moved with an easy and terrible speed, so close at times that the shock waves of disturbed water was as an intermittent series of blows which buffeted them hither and thither —

though still he managed to retain a hold on Hamish.

Then a smaller shark, as a flash of grey and white, sped turning between the two of them, passing so close to Richard that the rough, sand-papery skin of its back rasped away the flesh from his chest and chin, and tearing Hamish from his grasp.

Bemused and dazed with shock, fear and the speed of events, Richard struck out for the surface. Close to him he saw Hamish, and from his arm a thick stream of blood clouded the water — he was also aware, though as a background to his struggles, of morse-like squeaks that rang through the water, shrill and penetrating; and then of a dull, heavy thud as though one body had hurtled into another.

Gaining a fresh hold on Hamish, Richard struggled to the surface, and, with almost his last remaining strength, managed to lift his bleeding and now unconscious son high enough to roll him on board the raft, then to scramble up after him.

So great was the commotion behind that Richard could not resist a quick look. It took but a moment to assimilate what had happened as he took in the frightful scene of carnage which ensued before his eyes. The remaining sharks were tearing into yet another of their wounded number, remorselessly, ripping it to pieces as the body lay helplessly on the surface, belly up, stomach ripped open with its revolting, partially digested contents floating gruesomely about, only to be snatched and swallowed again by some of the smaller sharks who could not compete in the main orgy on their dying companion.

Then, in contrast to this maelstrom from hell, there swam slowly a single dolphin, about twenty yards away, a living elimination to any query on the

second shark's death, and to the thud that Richard had heard under water. By ramming the shark at speed the dolphin had winded its opponent so badly, breaking up many of its internal organs, that the brute was laid helpless for its fellows to finish off the job begun by the dolphin.

Hamish lay where he had been rolled, pale and unmoving. Staggering with exhaustion, Richard pulled him into the centre of the raft: Hamish's right hand had been cut off by the shark's bite, clean as a razor cut, blood flowing freely from the stump and severed arteries. As quickly as he could Richard ripped a long strip of cloth from his shirt, tied this firmly above his son's elbow, and tightened the knot until the crude tourniquet held the flow of blood to a mere occasional dribble.

All this he did, and then sat with Hamish's head in his lap, rocking gently with the waves and in his awful grief: for the shock to Hamish's mind and nervous system, let alone to his body, had been too great to bear, and Richard knew that this was to be the end of his son's short life on Earth, and the beginning of long years of loneliness and loss for himself. But for a while Hamish lived, and while he lived Richard caressed his face and hair, speaking wildly of much that might have been, his deep love for this only son of his, and of many other matters too deep and intimate to be recorded here.

But then a persistent and rather pathetic squeaking broke in on Richard's unhappy thoughts. He looked up; the sea was quite clear of sharks now; doubtless satiated with two of their own kind, they had made off. Now the only living creature in sight was the dolphin, who lay quietly next to the raft with a

broken nose and partially crushed forehead, obviously inflicted from the force of its collision with the shark in an attempt to save their lives.

There was something terribly sad about its expression; and the way it looked at Richard over Hamish's body spoke so eloquently and poignantly of feeling and frustration and much, much more, more than any words could express, that Richard, in spite of his tearing sorrow, was pulled sharply back from within himself.

"Poor friend dolphin," he said, his voice vibrant with deep commiseration; "it seems that we are both losers today; you are plainly dying, and I have a broken heart. But then we two are both also givers: you have given your life to save ours, while I have given my all to this, my son . . . look, and see how beautiful he is," saying which Richard raised Hamish so that the dolphin might see him.

Hamish's eyes fluttered, and then opened as the dolphin lifted his head slightly. For a moment each looked at the other; a moment charged with truth, for there was that in the vibrant air which brooked no logical reasoning or understanding, a oneship which seemed to claim from past association, a sorrow and gladness which owned only to love and the repayment of a long-standing debt.

Then, with a deep and peaceful sigh of pure contentment, the dolphin's life was loosed, hovered, and sped on its way; while the body rolled back and away from the raft, sinking slowly until it disappeared from sight.

"Dad," whispered Hamish weakly, looking at his father with eyes that glowed deeply in their final flare; "my time has come too, and I must leave you

for a while. I'm not afraid; it is all very beautiful; I wish we could go together, but you will be rescued later today. I love you; thank you for everything," he said, his voice fading; "we'll meet again, don't worry."

With that Hamish died quite peacefully, though Richard was conscious of a very gentle squeeze on his arm before he went.

* * * * *

And then the scene faded from Richard's eyes, tortured again as he had been by the vivid memory of that terrible loss But all this drifted away as he felt himself being whirled helplessly about; and then mounting upwards through stygian darkness, a darkness filled with weird and ugly shapes that leered and grimaced, and demons wrapped in forms of fire and pain, clutching and clawing at him as he rose. But all their taunts, entreaties and lascivious temptations were lost on him; for Richard was now girt with power and purpose, impervious to their advances and all about him.

Gradually the darkness grew lighter; and then, as the darkness faded, Richard grew conscious that those about him could scarcely hold their place, being oppressed by the light that grew brighter every moment as he rose; until soon he left these earthbound creatures, gibbering and mouthing as they reached for him, but in reaching fell back to their depths.

Stronger and stronger he felt as his old man's limbs dropped from him, and he took on a shining, celestial body. Brighter and brighter grew the light, and yet purer the ether and more ethereal his form to

receive its clarity of power.

And then before Richard lay a stretch of water of a clearness unknown on Earth, radiant and sparkling. Around him was life, vivid and glorious in all its forms; while in the distance, and on the water, two spots, as one, were coming rapidly towards him. Richard's heart pounded and his hands trembled, for he knew who it was before his eyes could pick out their shapes. Swiftly they approached, while Richard waited quietly; patience was now a tingling pleasure in anticipation made certain.

Very soon the two forms were clear in detail as Hamish, in splendid aura, rode in upon the dolphin's back, water creaming from them in a blued silver, translucent spray.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Richard raised his arm in joyous greeting, and waded into the water to meet his son; first to his knees and then to his waist before Hamish, eyes bright with happiness, sprang from the dolphin's back and into his arms.

Richard's heart was full as he held Hamish to him, and bent to fondle their friend, the dolphin.

* * * * *

Back in the staff room the log fire had now flickered low, and there was a chill just beginning to creep and pervade the air. Everyone had long since gone their various ways, either to bed or to catch up on the eternal marking.

The room was still, but no stiller than the old man who sat on, head bowed low; so still was he that it was apparent he was in fact not breathing at all The old man was dead to the World; and the lost voyage,

which had weighed so heavily on him in his loneliness, had turned into his last voyage, joyous and triumphant over death.